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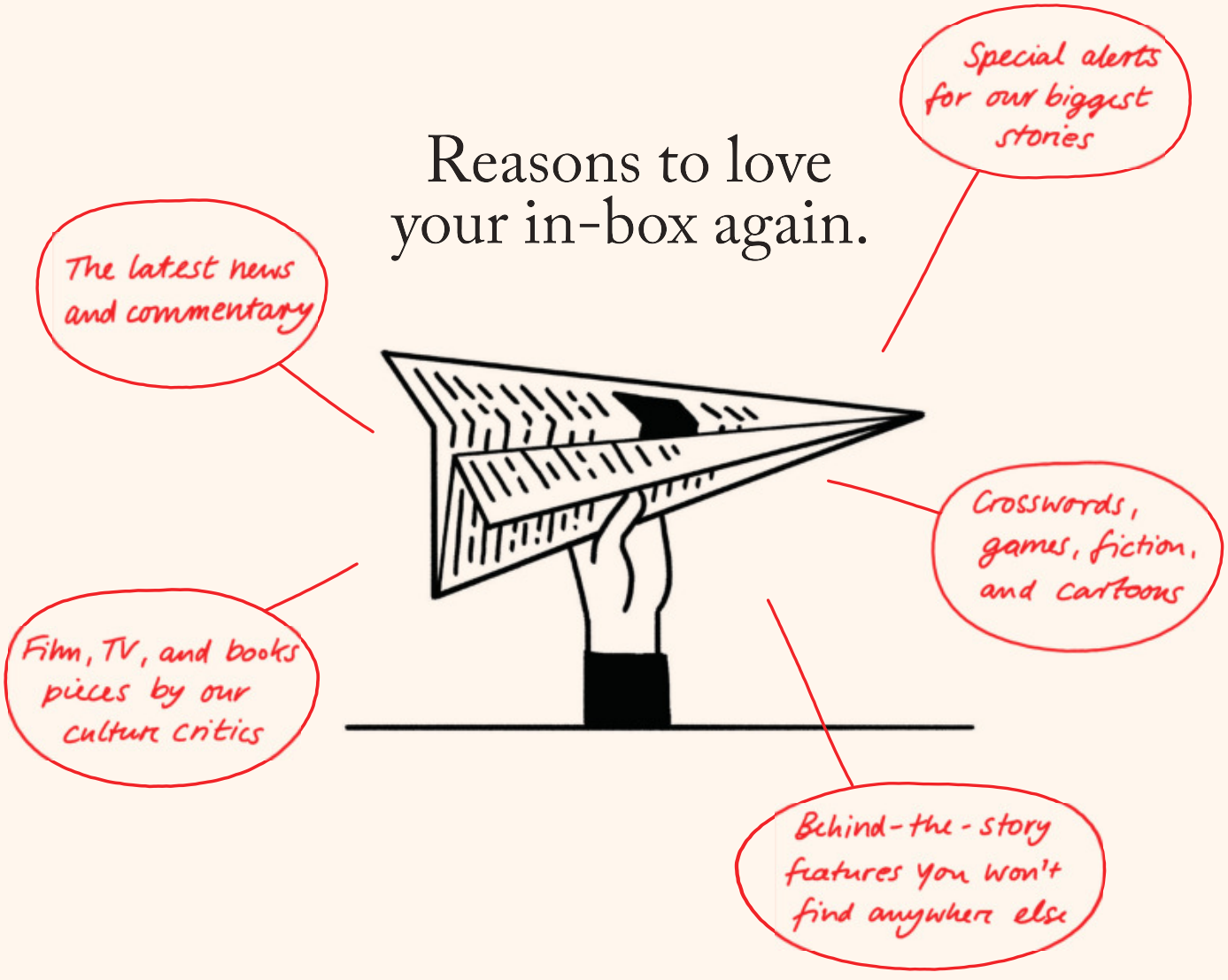
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THE NEW YORKER

JUNE 17, 2024

4 GOINGS ON

7 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
Isaac Chotiner on Modi's electoral setback; no-fee congestion; Blago's tips for doing time; a Louvre workout; like-minded troupers.

PERSONAL HISTORY

David Sedaris 12 Trophy Room
A last-minute safari in Kenya.

SHOUTS & MURMURS

Bruce Headlam and Stephen Sherrill 15 Fond of Flags

BRAVE NEW WORLD DEPT.

Jia Tolentino 16 Screen Grab
How kids get hooked on CoComelon.

ANNALS OF CELEBRITY

Ian Parker 22 His Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy
What Ye did to a Tadao Ando beach house.

SKETCHBOOK

Liana Finck 31 "Epic Battles"

LETTER FROM ISRAEL

Masha Gessen 36 A Semblance of Peace
Life in a Palestinian-Jewish community.

FICTION

Camille Bordas 46 "Chicago on the Seine"

THE CRITICS

BOOKS

Daniel Immerwahr 53 *Assessing the C.I.A.'s track record.*
Elizabeth Kolbert 58 *The debate over culling invasive animals.*
61 Briefly Noted
Katy Waldman 62 *Novels of the COVID era.*

THE THEATRE

Vinson Cunningham 66 *"Home," "What Became of Us."*

POEMS

David Biespiel 28 "Half Hour to Aberdour"
Yusef Komunyakaa 50 "A Big Red Shiny Apple"

COVER

Victoria Tentler-Krylov "Pawns in the Park"

DRAWINGS *Frank Cotham, Michael Maslin, Tristan Crocker, Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski, Marie Pax, E. S. Glenn, Bruce Eric Kaplan, Jeremy Nguyen, Edward Steed, Asher Perlman, Sam Gross, William Haefeli* SPOTS *Antony Huchette*

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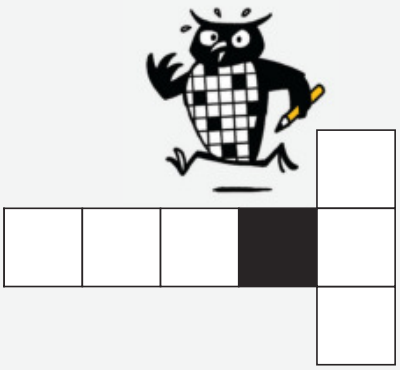

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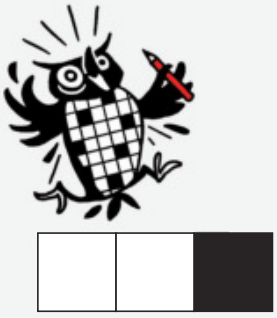

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CONTRIBUTORS

Ian Parker (*"His Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy," p. 22*) contributed his first piece to the magazine in 1992 and became a staff writer in 2000.

Jia Tolentino (*"Screen Grab," p. 16*) has been a staff writer since 2016. Her first book, the essay collection "Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion," came out in 2019.

Daniel Immerwahr (*Books, p. 53*) teaches history at Northwestern University and is the author of "How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States."

Katy Waldman (*Books, p. 62*), a staff writer, has written about books and culture for *The New Yorker* since 2018.

Bruce Headlam (*Shouts & Murmurs, p. 15*) is the editorial director of Aventine, a nonprofit research institute, and a host of the podcast "Broken Record."

Camille Bordas (*Fiction, p. 46*) is a 2024 Guggenheim Fellow. Her latest novel, "The Material," is out this month.

Masha Gessen (*"A Semblance of Peace," p. 36*), a staff writer, is a distinguished professor at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York.

David Sedaris (*"Trophy Room," p. 12*) has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 1995. His most recent essay collection is "Happy-Go-Lucky."

Liana Finck (*Sketchbook, p. 31*) was a 2023 Guggenheim Fellow and is the author of, most recently, "How to Baby" and "You Broke It!"

David Biespiel (*Poem, p. 28*) is the author of a dozen books, including "Beautiful Is the World," a forthcoming volume of new and selected poems.

Victoria Tentler-Krylov (*Cover*) is a children's-book author and illustrator. She illustrated "I'm Gonna Paint," by Anne Broyles, in 2023.

Stephen Sherrill (*Shouts & Murmurs, p. 15*) has contributed to the magazine since 1997.

THE WEEKEND ESSAY

How the Fridge Changed Flavor
By Nicola Twilley

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LINA MÜLLER

THE MAIL

MISSED CONNECTION

As a person who is incarcerated in Pima County Jail, I found it affirming to read Sarah Stillman's article about the replacement of in-person visits with video calls ("The Right to Hug," May 20th). I am writing this letter from "the hole"—isolated in a cell, with no view of the outside world. For people in my situation, communicating with our family and friends is all that we have.

Remote visits are not a suitable alternative to face-to-face connection. Stillman describes the technical difficulties; she could have also mentioned how hard it can be for loved ones to get verified by Global Tel*Link (now known as ViaPath) to use its services in the first place. Although some users do get verified quickly, others sit in limbo; trying to get verified can be incredibly frustrating. Even when the service is available, it is often abysmal. Sometimes you can't even place a call, or the static is so bad that nobody can hear you. Or you end up staring at a gray screen, the video feed not working on your end. I didn't have the heart to tell my mother, the last time we had a so-called video visit, that I couldn't see her on my screen, while she paid twenty-five cents a minute to see me. In 2022, our jail had a higher per-capita death rate than Rikers. Given that in-person visits have been shown to markedly reduce inmate violence, it is essential that jails support the ability of incarcerated individuals to maintain family bonds.

Zobella Brazil Vinik
Tucson, Ariz.

SUMMING UP

Anthony Lane, in his examination of the abridgment app Blinkist and the history of the summarization of literature, is rightly skeptical of the urge to condense ("Abridged Too Far," May 27th). He could have gone into further detail, though, about the real damage that can be done by these mostly well-meaning attempts. Many years ago, as an aspiring voice actor, I was hired to narrate several classics that had been condensed for middle schoolers. I still cringe at the memory of what was done to "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." Gone was any mention of Huck's father; rather than running away from an alcoholic abuser, Huck was portrayed as a happy-go-lucky lad who just happens to like to sleep outdoors. Gone, also, was Jim's flight from slavery; in the condensed version, he's just a friend of Huck's who wants to go adventuring.

The people behind this bowdlerization, and others, seemed to believe that, by removing anything remotely unpleasant or possibly controversial, they were helping young people to develop a love of story, without concern for what the original stories actually mean. In reality, young people exposed to these versions of such classics are deprived of the opportunity to fully assess and appreciate these books, and may even be absorbing messages that are completely antithetical to what their authors intended.

Bill Krauss
Prescott, Ariz.

Lane writes, amusingly, of the pleasure in realizing that "Jane Austen, of all people, can be distilled into a babbling stream of consciousness." It's worth noting, however, that Austen herself was not above seeking a shortcut to knowledge. In the late eighteenth century, an essayist, headmaster, and Anglican priest named Vicesimus Knox published "Elegant Extracts," an example of a commonplace book, in which a writer would gather together bite-size passages of literature for the purpose of instant edification, and what might almost be seen as a forerunner of Blinkist. Austen owned a copy of "Elegant Extracts," and deemed it so beneficial to the young mind that, in 1801, she gifted it to her eight-year-old niece Anna.

Simon O'Hagan
London, England

•

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GOINGS ON

JUNE 12 – 18, 2024

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.

Edward C. Moore, an expert silversmith who oversaw Tiffany & Co.'s silver program from the eighteen-sixties until his death, in 1891, was a true maverick, bringing in new techniques and fresh talent—including the French artisan Eugene Julius Soligny, a master engraver who created the ornate swan seen here. Moore's family donated more than two thousand items from his travels to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which were collected in their own dedicated gallery until 1942. They will be reunited, alongside works from the Tiffany's archive, for **"Collecting Inspiration: Edward C. Moore at Tiffany & Co."** (through Oct. 20), a new exhibition that cements Moore's legacy as an eccentric, adventurous collector with a dynamically roving eye for beauty.—*Rachel Syme*

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ABOUT TOWN

BALLET | **American Ballet Theatre's** summer season suggests a company in search of an identity. On one hand, it offers the traditional—"Swan Lake" (July 1-6). Then, there are the swooning period pieces "Romeo and Juliet" (July 9-13) and "Onegin" (June 18-22). The season's other two works suggest very different approaches to contemporaneity: in "Like Water for Chocolate" (July 16-20), Christopher Wheeldon goes for cinematic sweep, whereas in "Woolf Works" (June 25-29) Wayne McGregor taps into the visual wizardry of projections and lighting to evoke the poetry and fluidity of Virginia Woolf. But the real attraction is the company's striking roster, from the seasoned dramatic dancers Devon Teuscher and Daniel Camargo to the excitingly spontaneous Chloe Misseldine.—*Marina Harss (Metropolitan Opera House; June 18-July 20.)*

OFF BROADWAY | The shifting setting of Alexis Scheer's darkly comic drama **"Breaking the Story"** is, first, a foreign war zone, where the celebrated broadcast journalist Marina Reyes (Maggie Siff) is reporting amid explosions, until one knocks her and her cameraman (Louis Ozawa) to the ground. Then it's suburban Massachusetts, where Reyes, now back from the front lines, would like to quietly retire. But as old war-reporting assignments intrude and present-day interactions replay, we come to realize that we're actually in Marina's mind, rocked by P.T.S.D.-like shocks. Scheer and the play's director, Jo Bonney, cram so much into eighty minutes that not much sticks, despite harrowing light-and-sound effects and Siff's performance, which stays grounded even as her character goes to pieces.—*Dan Stahl (Second Stage; through June 23.)*

DANCE | Harlem Stage marks its fortieth anniversary with a season rich in dance by African American choreographers, of whom **Camille A. Brown** is a shining example. Brown's choreography gets under your skin, through its deep groove, humor, and cultural rootedness; in recent years, she has choreographed for the Metropolitan Opera ("Fire Shut Up in My Bones") and for Broadway ("Hell's Kitchen"). In this evening devoted to Black joy, Brown presents her duet "TURF," performed by Eric Parra and Maleek Washington, alongside pieces by younger dancers and choreographers she has worked with: Chloe Davis, Juel D. Lane, Mayte Natalio, Rickey Tripp.—*M.H. (Harlem Stage; June 14-15.)*

FOLKTRONICA | The experimental Argentinean artist **Juana Molina** rose to national prominence in the nineties as an eccentric actor in the one-woman sketch-comedy show "Juana y Sus Hermanas," but when she quit television to become a musician, she alienated a core audience that had pigeonholed her as a comedian. Undeterred by pans of her début record, she moved to L.A., where she bore the torch for folktronica, making calm acoustic compositions that incorporated synths, loops, and other effects as if into a dreamscape. Her sophomore LP, "Segundo," from 2000, remains a touchstone of the chill avant-garde music of the two-thousands. Molina has grown only more daring; her most recent album, "Halo" (2017), warps her faint vocals through configurations of muted folk tunes that conjure the future.—*Sheldon Pearce (Public Records; June 18.)*

MOVIES | When the filmmaker Chris Wilcha felt stuck in a rut directing TV commercials, he started shooting a documentary about a record store in suburban New Jersey where he'd worked as a teen-ager, in the nineteen-eighties. The resulting film, **"Flipside,"** is a breezy but prodigious memory piece, in which Wilcha examines his family background, traces his artistic obsessions, and recounts his adventures in the movie business. The heart of the movie is his exploration of footage from his ample archives and his unfinished documentaries—highlighting such figures as the jazz photographer Herman Leonard and the radio host Ira Glass. As for the record store, its story of art, commerce, and impractical passion introduces other remarkable personalities, including the store's owner, Dan Dondiego, Jr., and the once famous and still outrageous Uncle Floyd.—*Richard Brody (In theatrical release.)*

OFF OFF BROADWAY | For most of Joey Merlo's horror-camp anthology show, **"Midnight Coleslaw's Tales from Beyond the Closet!!!"**—directed by Nick Browne—the mood is erotic, goofy, and deliberately lo-fi: in one short act, a sexually compelling armchair comes between a hetero couple; in another, a woman (Jan Leslie Harding) is infantilized (and almost recloseted) by her father's ghost. Charlene Incarnate, a.k.a. Miss Bushwig 2017, plays our vampiric hostess, Coleslaw, who insures wind-tossed glamour by hauling around her own electric fan. The final one-act, though, pivots. "Life unfolds, paradise after paradise," a lonesome man (David Greenspan) says, as his gay friends vanish into marriage and conformity. He's haunted not by death but by a way of being, and this actual sorrow turns all the pretend shivers into something real.—*Helen Shaw (The Tank, through June 23.)*

TABLES FOR TWO

Sawa
75 Fifth Ave., Brooklyn

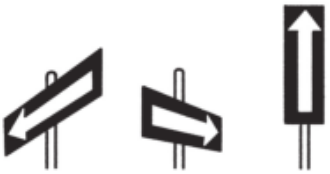
The first thing you see when you walk in the door at Sawa is a pane of glass, behind which a cook stands at a flour-dusted countertop pulling and portioning glossy blobs of blond pita dough. The bread is baked right there, in a great round tiled oven, so that when it hits your table and you tear it open it releases a white cloud of yeasty steam.

The pita comes with any of the restaurant's selection of Middle Eastern dips: a bright swirl of labneh, thick and tangy and strewn with olives and za'atar; a magenta whorl of sweet and smoky *muhammara*; hummus topped with a dizzyingly savory dollop of braised beef cheeks. Sawa, which opened in April, is owned by a pair of Lebanese siblings: Samaya Boueri Ziade, who used to run an occasional Levantine pop-up, and George Boueri, an architect. Ziade developed Sawa's recipes; the chef Soroosh Golbabae, formerly of the exceptional Persian restaurants Sofreh and Eyval, runs the kitchen.

There are many perfectly fine Lebanese restaurants feeding this part of Brooklyn, though until now a hungry person headed this way in search of something truly excellent would have had better luck staying on the R train until it reached Bay Ridge, where a meal at the wonderful Le Sajj is incomplete without a plate of the kitchen's beautiful *kibbeh nayyeh*, a dish of raw minced lamb and bulgur wheat. Sawa, thrillingly, brings a destination-worthy degree of precision and clarity to its cooking—and to *kibbeh nayyeh*, as well, which is unctuous and rich but made lemon-bright with sumac. *Batata hara*—cubes of crisp-fried potatoes—come with a sidecar of *toum*, fiery raw garlic whipped with oil and salt. The *samke nayyeh*—ribbons of cured fluke in a vermillion pool of blood-orange juice—looks like it ought to be just as forceful but tastes smooth and clean.

Sawa is the Arabic word for "together," and Ziade has said that she chose the restaurant's name to evoke memories of meals shared with loved ones in Beirut. There is an inherent splendor to the cuisine of the Levant, with its array of meats and seafoods and dazzling rainbow of herbs and fruits. But there's a specificity to Ziade and Golbabae's food, a practical display of elegance and exactitude, that makes their interpretations of traditional fare assertive and fresh. I felt a deep sense of contentment at the end of each meal I had at Sawa, lingering over a piece of semolina cake perfumed with orange blossoms or spooning up the dregs of a bowl of *layali lubnan*, semolina milk pudding. I watched puffs of steam rise up from other tables as guests tore into their pita rounds, their own lovely dinners just about to begin. *(Dishes $12–$50.)*

—Helen Rosner



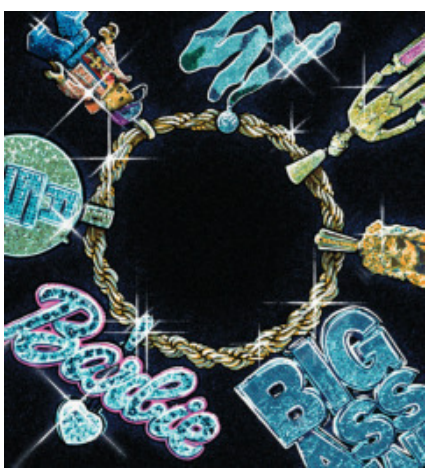
PICK THREE

The staff writer Sarah Larson on natural-history marvels.

1. Like the universe, the visual and scientific wonders of the American Museum of Natural History continue to expand. The multitude of diamonds in **"Ice Cold: An Exhibition of Hip-Hop Jewelry,"** curated by Vikki Tobak, rival the facets on the gem-and-mineral halls' nine-foot geode. A spin around a gallery featuring Jam Master Jay's Adidas rope chain, Nicki Minaj's "Barbie" necklace, A$AP Rocky's diamond-sapphire-and-ruby Lego pendant, and Slick Rick's platinum-and-diamond eye patch contextualizes jewelry, gems, and minerals in a refreshing new way.

2. The museum reimagined its Northwest Coast Hall, reopened in 2022, in collaboration with ten Native scholars; the results braid past and present together, to thrilling effect. Its recently opened exhibit **"Grounded by Our Roots"** features works by contemporary Indigenous artists alongside traditional crest poles, canoes, and regalia on permanent display. Rebecca Baker-Grenier's "Held by Generations," a dresslike vest and skirt featuring dentalium, beadwork, ermine, leather, and rhinestones, looks like it belongs on a runway.

3. The museum's newest construction, the mighty **Gilder Center,** is centered on a curvy, sunlit multistory atrium that evokes a glowing cavern, an earthworks cathedral, and the inside of a honeycomb; when I get there, I don't want to leave. Its design, by Jeanne Gang and her firm, helps guide visitors to once isolated spaces—small mammals this way, meteorites that way—and, with a giant staircase of benches leading skyward, it's also just a delightful place to hang out, perfect for kicking back and pondering the natural world.



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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
ELECTORAL SURPRISES

Last September, in a northern neighborhood of New Delhi, Mohammed Ishaq was lynched for eating a banana. The fruit had been offered up at a shrine to a Hindu deity during a religious festival; when Ishaq, a twenty-two-year-old manual laborer from a local Muslim family, picked it up, a crowd set upon him. He was tied to a pole, beaten—some of his fingernails were pulled out—and left a couple of hundred yards from his home. Hours later, he was dead. A video of his torture, set to music, went viral. Members of the community said that Ishaq suffered from mental disabilities; his father said, instead, that he was "obedient" and "innocent."

Violence against religious minorities is not new to India. But what has made this crime and many others like it during the past decade so disturbing is the sense that they have the tacit consent of the man who governs the country. Seventy-seven years after independence, India is led by a Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, who is dedicated to undermining the officially secular and democratic nature of the republic.

Modi has been called upon many times to denounce communal violence, but he usually retreats into silence, which his most radical supporters interpret as approval. (At times, the violence has been instigated by members of his Bharatiya Janata Party, or by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the extremist Hindu organization that gave him his start and has staffed much of his government.) Owing, in part, to Modi's personal popularity, India has often seemed to observers of democratic backsliding to be a more serious case than other places—such as the United States and Brazil—where authoritarian right-wing movements have been met by oppositions of equal—or greater—size and intensity. The truly disquieting thought about Modi's regime was that the cult of personality around him had become suffocating and seemingly impossible to pierce—until now.

Last week, Modi emerged victorious in his third straight election, and will almost surely remain Prime Minister. But the election was also a striking setback for him: his party lost more than sixty seats and its legislative majority, so he must now govern with coalition partners who have a more secular conception of how the Indian state should function. A number of explanations can be offered for this result: the manner in which the opposition Congress Party, which ruled India for most of the country's post-imperial history, was able to unite with other parties; a severe heat wave, which may have kept voters in Modi strongholds in the north away from the polls; and the Congress Party's campaign to win over Dalit voters, formerly called untouchables. But Modi was also working with real advantages: a largely pro-government media, after years of B.J.P. crackdowns; an extensive financial network; an obliging electoral commission. And he still came up short.

It would be tempting to attribute this decline to Modi's particular brand of aggressive nationalism and demagoguery—his Hindutva, or "Hinduness," project—and to say that the Indian public had grown tired of it. Voters delivered "a setback for authoritarianism," the historian Mukul Kesavan remarked, "but I'm not sure that was the intent." Indeed, Modi's party was able to capture approximately the same vote share as it did in his first reëlection, in 2019. But politics, especially in India, is about what the analyst Mihir Sharma described as "finding the right partner, and pushing in the right places. That's what matters." And that's what the Congress Party—under the much maligned leadership of Rahul Gandhi, the son, grandson, and great-grandson of Prime Ministers, whom Modi's allies tried to have removed from Parliament—was able to do. In competitive seats, the Congress coalition saw huge upticks from 2019, while the B.J.P. faced moderate losses.

That still leaves open the question

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

of what exactly the Modi era has meant for India. The rise of new varieties of hard-edged right-wing politics—often deemed to be of a "populist" variety—are commonly thought to have begun in 2015 and 2016, with Donald Trump's first campaign and Brexit. But Modi became Prime Minister in 2014. At the time, no one was quite sure how his brand would translate nationally: he had been denied a visa by the U.S. State Department for "severe violations of religious freedom" during a pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat that took place when he was the state's chief minister. But he ran a campaign that focussed enough on economic discontent to allow commentators and many voters to believe that he would not allow ethnic violence to get in the way of his fiscal agenda; others were simply glad to vote for a man who had put Muslims in what they deemed to be their proper place.

Once in power, Modi's party rescinded the special autonomy of Kashmir, the only majority-Muslim state in India after Partition, and the scene of harsh repression. His government also passed a citizenship bill that discriminates against Muslims. (It is in the process of being implemented.) Modi's economic record, meanwhile, has garnered much praise from business élites in India and abroad, but job growth has been disappointing and wages have been stagnant. His rhetoric during this campaign—perhaps he was sensing tighter margins—grew increasingly heated, with talk of Muslim "infiltrators" and false claims that the Congress Party planned to give away Hindus' personal belongings.

In January, in the northern town of Ayodhya, Modi theatrically inaugurated a Hindu temple built on the site of a mosque that had been destroyed, in 1992, by a mob that included members of the B.J.P. and the R.S.S. The new temple's opening, which became a media event, was seen by many observers as both a symbolic and a literal victory for Modi's brand of politics. Last week, however, Ayodhya's legislative seat was won by a Dalit candidate from a secular party, proving that Modi's political dominance could be countered even where it had appeared to triumph. A quarter century ago, the Indian scholar Sunil Khilnani wrote that, whereas India was "once a society structured by stable hierarchies," it had become "the most intensely political society in the world." He added, "Politics at once divides the country and constitutes it as a single, shared, crowded space, proliferating voices and claims and forcing negotiation and accommodation." What this election revealed is that this type of politics still survives in India—and remains worth fighting for, in India and beyond.

—Isaac Chotiner

HERE TO THERE DEPT.

SLOW YOUR ROLL

The first fifteen minutes of Max Katsov's daily commute, from Rockland County to One Police Plaza, are unfailingly pleasant—the Palisades Parkway, a bagel with cream cheese. Whatever hellscape 1010 WINS is forecasting is hard to reconcile with the sun-dappled river views at a steady fifty-five m.p.h. Then, near the Mobil station in Englewood Cliffs, the cars start to back up behind the George Washington Bridge, and "my day of stress," as Katsov put it recently, begins. This was Thursday morning, around nine. On Tuesday, he had filed retirement papers, to take effect next month. He'd logged twenty-one years on the job, and made detective, third grade. There were a couple of reasons for his chosen timing: the end of the school year (he has three kids) and the looming introduction of congestion pricing, which, in the interest of reducing emissions, among other progressive goals, would cost him fifteen dollars for the indulgence of piloting his Lexus S.U.V. into the central business district, below Sixtieth Street. Seventy-five bucks a week. Nearly four grand a year. But, on Wednesday, Governor Kathy Hochul made a surprising announcement that she was attempting to postpone the program indefinitely, and Katsov started to waver. "As soon as I got into work, everybody was, like, 'Oh, so you're pulling your papers?'" he said. "The joke was, like, 'She knew that Max put in his papers, and *now* she's going to repeal the congestion pricing.' So they're all trying to talk me into staying."

He was still debating it, amid braking on the helix and a barrage of texts from his wife, Carissa, about their elderly mini Yorkie, who had just begun wearing a diaper. ("It's kind of sad," Katsov said.) Google Maps showed a solid red bar across the bridge and onto the F.D.R. Drive. The female voice in his phone piped up to reassure him that, in spite of the "eleven-minute slowdown," he was still on the best route. The West Side Highway would offer no relief. "But, then again, I have to figure out what I'm going to do with my kids for the summertime," Katsov said. Carissa works full time, as a nurse in Westchester. "Andrew's going to basketball camp. It's three hours. What is that? That's not camp. It's a clinic."

Katsov wasn't insensitive to the lofty goals of congestion pricing—who could argue with less traffic?—but he was dubious about its efficacy (he predicted gridlock just north of Sixtieth) and brought a detective's, rather than an economist's, mind-set to the challenge of altering behavior. "My whole theory is that what the city should have done is limit delivery trucks from six to six," he said. "And that would alleviate half the traffic." It wouldn't alleviate what he was seeing on the far side of the bridge, however. "Sometimes I don't understand the choke points that happen here," he went on. "People just slow down. They're not sure of themselves. I mean, driving into the city for the past twenty years, I'm convinced drivers have gotten considerably worse at driving."

Another common choke point lay ahead, in the run-up to the R.F.K. Bridge (fourteen-minute slowdown). Katsov overruled the algorithm's recommendation that he exit the highway for a few blocks only to return, which seemed like unnecessary stress for minimal gain. A couple of scofflaw motorcyclists sneaked by, between lanes—no fair. "I can't even do my usual shoulder drive here," he said later, noting the absence of a breakdown lane as he passed

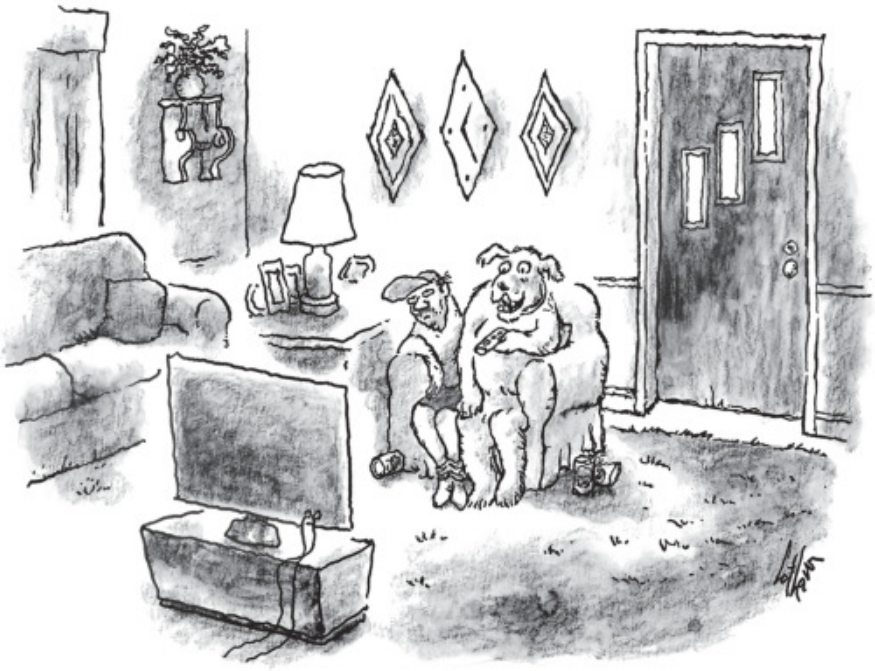
at a crawl underneath Carl Schurz Park. "Not that I would," he added.

By midtown, he was cruising again, and free to mourn the Rangers' aborted playoff run, a different source of agitation ("a lot of turnovers"). At last, a little more than an hour since he'd begun, Katsov arrived at the Brooklyn Bridge exit and veered off—and into a brief standstill, accompanied by honking, as an S.U.V. turned perpendicular to the flow, in a panicked attempt to avoid crossing the East River. "My God," Katsov exclaimed.

As if on cue, the news on the radio turned to the subject at hand. He adjusted the volume to hear Governor Hochul's rationale for abandoning the plan. As New York rebounds from the pandemic, she said, "I cannot add another burden to working- and middle-class New Yorkers or create another obstacle to our continued recovery." Katsov nodded, feeling understood. "So she's pandering to the middle class because she wants that vote," he said.

It was ten o'clock, late enough that none of the spaces in the department's lot would be available. In the past, Katsov might have circled for street parking (congestion!), but recently his boss had rewarded him with a coveted spot in the underground garage. He pulled an orange permit from a sun visor, flashed his I.D., and was off the city grid no sooner than he'd entered it. "At the end of my career, I get all these perks," he said.

—Ben McGrath



"I know it's the championship game, but I'd rather watch a movie with a dog in it."

• •

THE BLOTTER
INSIDE ADVICE

In 2009, Donald Trump fired Rod Blagojevich, the former governor of Illinois, from "The Celebrity Apprentice." "Your 'Harry Potter' facts were not accurate," Trump told Blagojevich, who was under indictment at the time, for trying to sell President-elect Barack Obama's vacated Senate seat the previous year. Blagojevich was found guilty, and in 2012 he began a fourteen-year prison sentence, which Trump commuted eight years later. "Seemed like a very nice person," Trump said after the commutation, calling Blagojevich's punishment "a tremendously powerful ridiculous sentence in my opinion." Blagojevich emerged from prison a self-described "Trumpocrat."

"I'd have just been coming home a couple weeks ago had President Trump not, you know, shortened it," Blagojevich said recently. "I keep having this dream where I'm still in prison," he went on. "Probably because I'm writing this book." Since last August, Blagojevich has been at work on a memoir about his time in the clink, with "Gangster Disciples . . . Sinaloa drug-cartel leaders . . . murderers, bank robbers, sex offenders," and Enron's Jeffrey Skilling. "I went from Obama, Clinton, congressmen, senators, and lawmakers to Smelly and Socks and Sharky and Mr. B.," he added. "They all have nicknames." His was Gov. The former governor does not enjoy writing but said that he hopes that his prison memoir "will be helpful to folks facing hard times." Trump, who is now facing up to four years in prison for thirty-four felony counts of falsifying business records, might want to skim the CliffsNotes.

To begin with, Blagojevich points out, a long sentence, while otherwise undesirable, can be used to your advantage. "The fourteen-year sentence made guys think, The Gov's a badass, he didn't snitch on anybody," he said. "In that world, the snitches, to quote them, 'are bitches who deserve stitches.'"

Blagojevich suggests getting in the shape of your life. He figures that he ran "probably ten thousand miles, if not longer," during his eight years inside, along with "probably twenty thousand pushups." He went on, "You walk around the track, you do pushups. It helps deal with the bitterness and anger and sense of disillusionment." He added, "I'm as fit as a fiddle, in stark contrast to the current governor of Illinois."

A hobby is also helpful. "My band was G-Rod and the Jailhouse Rockers," he said. "I did an Elvis medley, which started out with all of 'Don't Be Cruel,' two verses of 'That's All Right,' two verses of 'All Shook Up,' and all five verses of 'Jailhouse Rock.'" He continued, "Music was so helpful to me because it was therapeutic. If you practice it, you get better at it. Your range increases a little bit. Your voice kind of expands. Then you can work on what Frank Sinatra was big on—phrasing. Before I knew it, the day was over."

Rather than watch TV or movies,

Blago recommends books. "I read the Bible every day," he recalled. He devoured Viktor Frankl's "Man's Search for Meaning" three times. "It's very short, and it has a lot of profound things in it," he explained. One lesson that he drew: "If I can come out of here stronger and smarter, it's a fuck you to those motherfuckers who did it to me." He also read Shakespeare. " 'Henry V' a few times. 'Henry IV,' Parts 1 and 2. 'Richard II.' 'Richard III.' 'Hamlet,' of course. 'King Lear.' 'Henry VI.' " He cleared his throat and recited, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers."

Watch what you eat at the chow hall, he warns. "Some guys do crazy things to some of the food," he said. "One time, a guy urinated in the pot of oatmeal because he was pissed off—no pun intended." Black-market restaurateurs on your cellblock are a good alternative: "Once in a while, I'd say to myself, 'I'm gonna go off for a longer run—ten miles—and then I'm gonna treat myself to one of Oso's tacos.' You could see he liked his own food. So once in a while I'd have it"—onions, tomatoes, peppers, chicken, cheese, all smuggled from the kitchen.

Finally, Blagojevich advises identifying any supporters. "There was a cop that wanted to make an example of me, so he gave me the worst job," he recalled. "Washing pots and pans at five o'clock in the morning. I got rescued from that because his superior was from Chicago's South Side and his mother still lived there and she liked me. So he put me in the kitchen warehouse, a highly coveted job." Conspiracy theories soon spread among his fellow-inmates. "I was supposedly getting special treatment because Obama had called the warden," Blago said. "I'm telling you, he didn't make the call."

—Charles Bethea

Donald Trump and Rod Blagojevich

PARIS POSTCARD
LITHE AT THE LOUVRE

Art museums weren't always hushed, decorous places. The first director of the Met complained of nannies "taking children to some corner to defile the floors of the Museum," and of patrons blowing snot into their fingers, spitting tobacco juice, whistling, singing, and calling to friends from one gallery to the next. To curtail this kind of behavior, Bianca Bosker writes in "Get the Picture," museums developed lists of rules. Today, the Met prohibits everything from ice skates to flowers, and the Louvre reminds visitors that to "speak publicly" they need a permit. On a recent Saturday morning, however, joyful disorder was back at the latter's Caryatid Room. Wearing spandex and sweatbands, dozens of visitors were grooving to "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough," pausing only for the occasional swig of water.

"Step-touch!" Their instructor, Jérémie Sibethal, called out the moves. Eight counts elapsed.

"Now top model!"

The dancers sashayed around the room, weaving between marble gods and goddesses. Someone whooped. They segued into disco fingers, pointing at statues, and then into a hop-bump maneuver. Another eight counts down.

"*Devant, devant, derrière, derrière,*" Sibethal yelled, as the visitors thrust their pelvises and windmilled their arms.

Technically, visitors to the Louvre are not allowed to drink, run, or "make a lot of noise," but this spring, under the auspices of the museum's Run to the Louvre program, such conduct has been not only tolerated but encouraged. To celebrate the upcoming Olympic and Paralympic Games in Paris—and in conjunction with the ongoing "Olympism" exhibit—the museum's administrators invited the choreographer Mehdi Kerkouche to "transform the world's biggest museum into the biggest dance and sports gym." Tickets for sixteen dates sold out almost immediately.

The day had started early, with participants reporting to the I. M. Pei pyramid before 7:45 A.M., so that they could squeeze in a session before the museum opened. The first thrill: no lines. The second: having the Louvre all to yourself, sunlight streaming in through the glass roof. A custodian zoomed around on a Zamboni-like machine, grooming the floor.

There was little time for careful inspection of the premises, à la "From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler." The workout was surprisingly intense. After the dance unit, Sibethal jogged the class over to the museum's medieval quarter, where "Highway to Hell" was blasting amid the vestiges of a late-twelfth-century fortress. This was the boot-camp module: jumping jacks, walking dips. By the time the group had finished a mini relay race—up the stairs, tag the sphinx—most everyone was pouring sweat.

"Advil tonight!" the instructor, Léo Bordessoule, shouted.

To the Khorsabad Court, for a dancehall lesson with Queensy Blazin'. The music, here, was Sean Paul. The art was Assyrian. Queensy told the exercisers to feel their feet, to root themselves in the ground. She had them cross their arms in front of their faces and then throw their heads back, splaying their chests open to the sky—"HAAAAA!" It felt surreal to yell in the museum, flanked by twenty-eight-ton alabaster-winged bulls.

At 8:45 A.M., the group arrived at the Marly Court, where Laure Dary was sitting in sukhasana in the middle of the central staircase. Yoga mats had been laid out on the floor below. Participants were invited to claim one and to take off their shoes.

The atmosphere was supremely peaceful—potted trees, symmetry, that sunlight again. "Don't close your eyes," Dary intoned, as she led the group in a series of salutations. "Pick a sculp-

ture and watch it the entire time." And that is how at least a few Parisians will forevermore associate Añjaneyāsana with Antoine Coysevox's "Fame Riding Pegasus."

Back at the lockers: exhaustion and elation. A pair of friends in their sixties with matching orange-rimmed eyeglasses were planning to spend the rest of the day in the picture galleries, the unofficial Parisian rule that one should not go anywhere but the gym in gym clothes be damned.

Toward the end of her session, Dary had asked each yogi to pick a word that embodied his or her experience at the Louvre that morning. A few shared their choices: *Sérénité*. *Joie*. Queensy. Paris. Mona Lisa, what?

—Lauren Collins

DEPT. OF PEDIGREE
"PINAFORE" ON REPEAT

A hundred years ago, four moneyed New York families were summering in Blue Hill, Maine, including Dr. Seth Milliken and his wife. "A movie theatre had opened up in town, and they wanted to protect their children from this corruptive influence," Joanne Lessner said the other day. To keep the youngsters out of trouble, the story goes, a house guest suggested mounting a production of Gilbert and Sullivan's "H.M.S. Pinafore." "They performed it on the Millikens' schooner, and all the Pierce-Arrow cars were lined up at the docks with their headlights on, and that was the lighting," Lessner recounted. "A piano and violins floated on a dinghy nearby. It stormed, and the piano almost washed overboard—but the troupe was born."

The troupe is the Blue Hill Troupe, which now boasts some four hundred active members and stages a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta every spring. The proceeds go to charity, as decreed by its charter, which is written in rhyming verse. In the troupe's early decades, it drew blue-blooded Upper East Siders—by 1926, its shows had moved to New York, with a rendition of "The Pirates of Penzance" at the Millikens' Madison Avenue mansion—but it now welcomes what "Pinafore" calls the "lowly born," alongside a descendant of J. Pierpont Morgan. The members, both "backstagers" and "frontstagers," range from professionals to enthusiastic amateurs. "We have lawyers, we have baristas," Lessner, who joined in 1997, said. "We have a retired C.I.A. agent." The troupe attracts "like-minded people," she explained, meaning hams who can toss off the lyrics to "I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General."

Lessner, who writes musicals and detective novels by day, was playing Josephine in the centennial production of "Pinafore," in April—which will be reprised in Maine in August, this time on dry land. Troupers describe the group as a "second family," but its ranks are full of actual kin. To date, there are a hundred and two "met and marrieds"—couples forged in the troupe—and parents drag in their kids. Lessner is part of a three-generation clan of troupers. Her mother, Helen, a former ad copywriter, saw her first troupe show, "The Yeomen of the Guard," in 1954, and she joined the chorus starting in 2000. In 2010, in "The Gondoliers," she played Inez, who "solves the plot with a lovely recitative," Helen recalled, over family dinner before a rehearsal. "My husband joined shortly after I did, and he was a backstager," she added. She was singing in "Pinafore" alongside Lessner's children, Julian and Phoebe. Lessner's husband, the Broadway conductor Joshua Rosenblum, would not be participating. "His jam is the Russian composers—Prokofiev, Shostakovich—so for him Sullivan is a little bland," Lessner said.

Lessner was six when Helen brought her to her first Blue Hill show. "I grew up a Gilbert and Sullivan addict," she said. "I would make my babysitters listen to me while I put on the records and sang all the parts." "Pinafore" is her thirteenth troupe show and her second go-round as Josephine, the captain's daughter who falls for a humble sailor. "Of all the Gilbert and Sullivan heroines, I think she's the juiciest," she said.

Her son, Julian, a software engineer and a comedy writer, said, "I was like my dad, not super into Gilbert and Sullivan growing up. But then when I was twelve they did 'The Sorcerer,' which has a part for a little kid, and my mom was, like, 'You have to audition.'" His fiancée, Sabrina, whom he met on Hinge, was in last year's production of "Pirates." They played a pirate-and-maiden couple; Helen was the assistant stage manager. "Every G. & S. show ends the same way: everyone gets married to whoever is nearby," Julian said. "I texted, like, 'Hey, Grandma, can you make sure Sabrina and I get paired up?'" He compared the troupe to "a very *specific* Hinge."

Had the troupe fulfilled its original purpose of keeping the kids out of trouble? "I'm a pop-rock singer-songwriter, so we're still rebelling," Phoebe, who graduated from college last year, said. "It's such a shame that Gilbert and Sullivan aren't alive to have TikTok. If more Gen Z knew about them, they'd want to join a group like this."

A few weeks later, all four were onstage at El Teatro of El Museo del Barrio, an Art Deco auditorium with dreamy muralled walls, on upper Fifth Avenue. Many in the crowd were longtime troupers, including Win Rutherfurd, a retired estate lawyer who'd relinquished the part of Captain Corcoran after a health scare. "This would have been my forty-second principal role," he said. One of the troupe's traditions is to cap rehearsals with a trip to a local watering hole, ending with a rousing chorus from "Pirates": "Hail, Poetry, thou heav'n-born maid!/Thou gildest e'en the pirate's trade."

—Michael Schulman

PERSONAL HISTORY

TROPHY ROOM

Going on safari.

BY DAVID SEDARIS

It was a good year for Christmas parties. At one, I met a number of authors I had always admired. This can be tricky, but they were all lovely. The food was lovely, too, though I dropped a miniature barbecue sandwich on the new white shirt I was wearing, and will likely never get the grease stain out.

At another party, the following week, I was introduced to a curator from the Metropolitan Museum. We talked about people who throw soup and oil on beloved paintings, hoping to draw attention to climate change or poor nutrition or whatever their cause is, and then I learned that he would soon be leaving on an African safari, the sort where you carry a camera rather than a gun.

"Have you been planning it for months?" I asked.

"Actually, it all came together over the past few weeks," he told me.

On the subway home, I said to Hugh in the faux-pouty voice that I use to challenge extreme injustice—other couples taking a vacation when it should be us, for example—"Why can't *we* go on a safari?"

A month later, we were in an open-sided four-by-four vehicle surrounded by seven lions, none of which seemed to care about us. All of them were female, and I wondered if, when writing about this afterward—for surely I would—I might be taken to task for using the term "lionesses."

"Is it like referring to someone as a 'waitress' or a 'stewardess'?" I whispered to Hugh, who was seated beside me, sketching. "Will people say, 'Why did you have to mention their gender in the first place? Why can't you just say "lions" and leave it at that?'"

To my mind, the gender mattered, since the females do the majority of the hunting, and are therefore scarier when they're eight feet away and can surely smell you.

I looked the subject up later, when we got back to camp, and learned that there's some debate about whether or not to refer to lionesses as "she-lions." Of course, none of that debate is coming from the big-cat family. What surprised me about these animals was their playfulness, the way one would sidle up to another and gently swat her, or roll over on her back with her paws in the air. We'd been stationary for ten minutes or so when one of the seven walked in front of our four-by-four, hunched over, and defecated. I thought that, like a cat in a flower bed, she'd then cover it up, but no. The moment she rejoined the others, a jackal darted out of the tall grass, snatched the turd in his mouth, and was about to make off with it when a hyena intervened, and a struggle ensued.

"Over a *turd*?" Hugh whispered.

We might have stayed there for hours, happily observing, but then another four-by-four pulled up. Its passengers went nuts: "Seven lionesses!" Hugh and I looked at the new arrivals with an expression that read, Um, they're sort of ours. As if we personally had gathered them there. Then another four-by-four pulled up, and another after that.

I don't know how many vehicles were roaming the Maasai Mara that afternoon. It's a five-hundred-and-eighty-three-square-mile nature reserve, so had there been a thousand other four-by-fours we likely wouldn't have seen more than a handful of them. June to October is the busiest season in Kenya, safari-wise, and this was early February. It was hot but not humid, and there were three of us in the vehicle: me, Hugh, and our twenty-six-year-old guide, Dalton, a Maasai tribesman who had on a moss-green shirt with the name of the place where we were staying embroidered on its right breast pocket. His pants were khaki and knee-length, worn with ankle-high suède boots.

ILLUSTRATION BY MIKEL JASO

Dalton's hair was cut short. His head was almost perfectly round, and he was missing several of his bottom teeth. "What is it you would like to see?" he'd asked upon collecting us that first bright morning at the airstrip.

"A panda," I told him.

On the ninety-minute drive to our camp, we saw every animal that was in "The Lion King" and then some. They were just *there*, like ants at a picnic, except that they were elephants and giraffes. We saw zebras and leopards and wildebeests and warthogs, all grazing or resting or fleeing on this grass-covered, seemingly limitless plain.

"Have you seen a kill?" people in the other four-by-fours—couples with camera lenses the size of the Hubble telescope—would ask. It didn't take long to realize that seven lionesses weren't enough. They had to have blood dripping from their jaws.

"On our first day, we saw a lion eating a wildebeest," I'd tell them.

That was like saying you'd seen one eating a sandwich. The prize was to watch one pounce on her prey, and rip its throat out. "Just last month, a little after midnight, two lions took down a zebra right there next to your tent," the woman who checked us into our camp told us, pointing over the railing to a shaded ravine. The camp was built on the banks of the Talek River, which was swollen from recent rains but still flowed lazily. There was no fence around the property. Wild animals came and went at their leisure, though during the day all we saw were crocodiles and mongooses. It was after dark that the action took place, so at night we had to be escorted from our tent to the common area by Maasai tribesmen carrying spears. The most dangerous animal—what Dalton called "the most killingest"—was the hippo. I had learned this years earlier from a nature documentary and was surprised, as they always look so happy to me, almost like they're smiling.

We saw countless hippos in Kenya. "All they want is to get into our swimming pool," the property manager, a man named Steven, told us. "And if that happens we will *never* get them out."

He was giving us a tour, and was leading us from the hydroponic vegetable garden—the "*shamba* of goodness," it was called—to the recreation area. I looked at the man whose job it was to guard the pool we were passing. "What do hippos smell like?" I asked.

Steven thought for a moment. "Cows."

There were nine tents in all. "Are there many other guests at the moment?" I'd asked the woman who checked us in.

"We have no guests here," she told me, smiling so broadly I could see her gums. "Only family."

Oh, no, I thought, for doesn't a person go on safari to *escape* that kind of talk? Ditto "*shamba* of goodness."

If I know I have to get up early, I generally have a devil of a time falling asleep. The place where Hugh and I slept was a tent in the same way that a Shake Shack is an actual shack. The pitched ceiling was, at its highest point, twelve feet, and, not including our deck, which overlooked the river, we had a good nine hundred square feet of floor space—with a real floor. There was electricity and Wi-Fi. Potable water. A tub, a shower, and a toilet. Complimentary laundry service. Outstanding food. Our outings took place early in the morning and late in the afternoon, so I'd go to bed and, knowing that we needed to meet Dalton at 6 A.M., lie awake while Hugh snored beside me. The book I'd brought along for the trip was "The Andy Warhol Diaries," which didn't at all fit the location. Nor did it make sense to watch, say, past seasons of "Project Runway." We were in Kenya, after all, and could hear all sorts of creatures on the other side of our canvas walls, roaring and moaning and carrying on.

On the first night, I reached for my iPad and watched a documentary on baboons. It wasn't the kind of program that gives the animals names and talks about them in a whisper ("...but Denice wasn't about to give up that easily"). Still, it was less interesting than I wanted it to be. The best part was when the heir to the colony, a four-month-old male, was killed by an intruder and his mother carried his carcass around until it was just a rag of fur.

The following afternoon, we came upon a troop of baboons resting beside the river. There were at least thirty of them, many with babies on their backs. "Get out your camera," Dalton said as he turned off the four-by-four's engine. I'd told him from the get-go that photography was not my thing.

"I will not be taking a single picture," I'd promised.

"Not even if we come upon a rhino?" he asked.

"Not even if we see one fighting a mother grizzly," I told him.

Dalton kept thinking I'd buckle, but I never did, at least not in Kenya. Later, in Tanzania, I would pull out my phone, but not for an animal. Rather, it was for a sign painted on the wall of a gas station. "No Smorking," it read.

Evan, one of the guards at our camp, also noticed that I wasn't taking any photos. He was slight and handsome and was wearing a traditional Maasai outfit that consisted of two rectangles of plaid fabric, each a different color. On his feet were sandals made of old tires. He looked outstanding, as if he'd been dressed by Comme des Garçons. When I complimented him on his clothing, he removed the upper piece of fabric, which was worn almost like a shawl. "Here, try it on," he said.

I wanted to explain that in America this would be called cultural appropriation.

"What's that?" I could imagine him asking.

To be honest, I've never understood it myself. "I think it's when you make a taco with, like, blue cheese on it" was the best I would have been able to come up with.

"Everyone else is photographing all the time," Evan said, taking back the piece of fabric and sounding, if not hurt, then at least a little underappreciated. "So why not you?"

"I jot things down instead," I told him, pulling my notebook from my pocket and showing it to him. "For instance, earlier today I wrote . . ." I looked at a page and groaned. It was as if a person with only two fingers—one on each hand—had written it. While in a bumper car.

I never saw a paved road in the Maasai Mara. A few were wide enough for two vehicles, but were still as rocky and hard to navigate as the barely discernible, often flooded paths we frequently found ourselves on. My big fear before going on safari was that I wouldn't be able to exercise. We weren't allowed to venture on foot beyond the confines of

our camp, so I worried that in order to meet my daily Apple Watch minimum of ten thousand steps—roughly four and a half miles—I'd have to walk back and forth across our deck for hours on end. I had two and a half miles under my belt the morning that Dalton met us at the airstrip, and, by the time we reached our camp, I'd miraculously logged twice that many. It seemed my watch mistook the bumpiness of the road, and the jostling it gave rise to, for walking. This was great for my step count but awful for writing.

It was only when we stopped that I could record anything legible. That said, my notes weren't always as illuminating as I'd expected them to be. "What does 'Alt' mean?" I asked Hugh over dinner one night.

He looked down at the page. "It's not 'Alt,'" he said. "It's 'A.L.T.'"

Then I remembered. We'd been out early that morning, observing a short parade of ostriches. It was misty, and I pointed to a vague shape on the horizon. "What's that?" I asked Dalton.

He followed my finger and told me it was likely an A.L.T. "Animal-looking thing," he explained.

Another of my notes simply read "Wow!," but I knew right off what it referred to—the highlight of our trip. We had driven up alongside a herd of eight elephants, three of them babies. Their size was impressive, but that I was prepared for. What surprised me, and was so magnificent, was the sound of the tall grass they were eating being torn from the ground with their trunks. Dalton had turned the engine off, so that was all we could hear. "Close your eyes," I said to Hugh as I closed my own as well. If I were to manufacture a perfume, it would smell the way that grass being ripped from the ground by elephants sounds—simultaneously soothing and astonishing—and simply everyone would have to have it. The problem is that it wouldn't go with any of the perfume names I've come up with over the years, the best being Obsequious.

The eight elephants were on our last day in Kenya. The following morning, we flew to Tanzania, not for more safari but to stay in a resort on the island of Zanzibar. The only animals I saw during our time there were lizards—some nearly a foot long—and snails the size of Hugh's fist. The beach was pretty—sand as white as sugar, palm trees. The property was guarded by men with clubs tucked into their belts, and the moment you left it, walking, say, the twenty feet from your lounge chair to the water's edge, you were set upon by people trying to sell you things: a hard-boiled egg from a bucket, a seashell, cashews, a ride on a boat, a painting of a leopard, a T-shirt with "HAKUNA MATATA" printed on it. "My friend!" someone would call, extending a closed fist and wanting you to tap it with one of your own, even while you were in the sea.

This is why I have never been to Bali or Mauritius or any of those other places people go to get some sun in the winter. The water in Zanzibar was warm and such an arresting shade of turquoise that it seemed to have been dyed. But the income gap between the people who stayed at the resort and the people who actually lived on the island was so wide you couldn't really see anything else. Plus, the hotel staff said "Hakuna matata," which means "No worries" in Swahili, incessantly.

"Could I maybe have more coffee?"

"Hakuna matata."

"I'm not feeling terribly well."

"Hakuna matata."

"God, that's a big snail."

"Hakuna matata."

It got to the point where you didn't dare say anything just because you didn't want to hear "Hakuna matata" again.

There were no price tags on anything. If you were to ask how much a sack of peppercorns was and the answer started with "For you, I am going to offer a special deal," you knew you'd be overpaying. Everyone we came across was seemingly on the make, and who could blame them, really?

"How much for a ride to Stone Town and back?" Hugh and I asked a taxi-driver one swampy afternoon. He quoted us a price, but when we got there he claimed, "I didn't say a hundred and fifty thousand shillings"—the equivalent of nearly sixty dollars—"I said two hundred thousand," which simply wasn't true. In the grand scheme of things, it wasn't an enormous amount—a difference of twenty dollars, which I was going to give him anyway as a tip—but when you capped it off with "Hakuna matata" I felt like crying.

We could have ended our vacation in Kenya. It was me who wanted to add Tanzania, and mainly so that I could put it on my list of countries I have travelled to. The only thing I knew before arriving was that it's not safe to be an albino there. Many people consider them to be evil, yet place great value on their organs and other body parts: their hands and hearts, entire legs. It's easier to harvest them from children, so kids are at higher risk of being abducted and dismembered. Their parts are sold to witch doctors, who use them to create amulets and potions one might employ while searching for precious metals, say, or to improve one's luck in regard to fishing. It sounds absolutely insane. How could anyone possibly be so gullible? you wonder. Then you think of all the Americans—some may be your neighbors, your co-workers, your wife or your uncle—who genuinely believe that J.F.K., Jr., did not die in a plane crash, but is alive and well and working in cahoots with Donald Trump to stop the Clintons from drinking the blood of babies. And you're, like, The leg of a butchered child might help me find gold? O.K. I guess I've heard crazier things.

The world can be a savage place, but that's not the lesson you want to carry home with you. Yes, we humans are cruel and often dangerous, but there's still nature, and before it's too late we need to appreciate it. Of course, not everyone can hang out with elephants, but look at that bird perched on your feeder, and at that squirrel chasing the bird away from said feeder. Look at the rats scuttering before you on a New York street, at the spider that somehow got trapped in your elevator. We're all on a safari of one kind or another—it's just that some of us aren't returning with two brilliant rectangles of Maasai plaid fabric and a bacterial infection. ♦

Therein Lies a Tale Dept.

From the magazine Cooperative Living.

According to local lore, Witchduck Road in Virginia Beach was named for an alleged witch in the 1700s and not in connection with the pied-grilled grebe, as noted in the February issue of Cooperative Living.

FOND OF FLAGS

BY BRUCE HEADLAM AND STEPHEN SHERRILL

My wife is fond of flags. I am not.

—Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, explaining why a "Stop the Steal" flag was flown outside his home in Alexandria, Virginia.

My wife is fond of fast food. I am not. My wife is particularly fond of the Wendy's Baconator. I argue that it's less expensive to order a Dave's Double with a side of bacon, then put your own pretzels on top. (I'm fond of the Rold Gold Tiny Twists Original.) That way, the pretzels stay crunchy. Because my wife and I own our Virginia home jointly, she is entitled to her order. It was my wife who refused to tip the delivery driver last week when her burger arrived soggy, and who wrote, "You want a tip? Here's one: go back to your own country," on his DoorDash page. It had nothing to do with me.

My wife is fond of private jets. I am not. It was my wife who accepted a free flight on a Gulfstream G200 to Aspen, Colorado, for an all-expenses-paid weekend with oil-industry lobbyists. I occupied the seat next to my wife, because it would have been empty otherwise. While flying, I was offered a package of cashews "dusted with truffle salt" and, not wanting to appear churlish, I accepted. In Aspen, I occupied the left side of the king-size bed in the Presidential suite of the Four Seasons, which also would have been empty otherwise. My wife is fond of luxury hotels and eight-hundred-thread-count sheets, which I find excessive. That is her right as a private citizen.

My wife is fond of Timothée Chalamet. I am not. While I find him beautiful, I don't find him attractive, if that makes sense. My wife was solely responsible for our seeing "Call Me by Your Name" three times. I was not made aware in advance of the enthralling sexual undertones of the movie and went only to accompany my wife, who is a private citizen and a Regal Crown Club member.

My wife is fond of expensive men's watches. I am not. It was my wife who stuffed a vintage 38-mm. Patek Philippe Calatrava in my underwear as we left Neiman Marcus during the holiday weekend. So there was no reason that I should submit to questions from the security guard, especially one who refers to me as "pal" and not "Your Honor." Nor is there any reason, once the store's manager graciously offered the watch as an apology for the guard's rudeness, that I shouldn't wear it in public. My wife is fond of expensive men's watches. I am not, although this one is quite handsome.

My wife is not fond of your wife. I am. For that reason, I disagree with my wife's characterization of your wife as a "hatchet-faced crone." I also believe it's unnecessary to "hide the liquor" from her every time the two of you visit. I think it's quite possible for your wife and me to be good friends, even having dinner together occasionally, without it becoming a "thing." But because my wife is an equal equity holder in our Virginia home—and therefore an equal equity partner in all the contents within—I agreed to hide the liquor from your wife, whom I'm fond of although my wife is not.

My wife is fond of Norwegian death metal. I am not. It was my wife who blasted Gorelord's "Dismembered Virgin Limbs" over a loudspeaker for three straight days after you complained that our dog once again defecated on your children's splash pad. I wasn't aware of the music until the police showed up. I then asked my wife politely to turn it down, or maybe switch to something softer, like Darkthrone or some early Myrkskog. She declined, which is her right as a citizen with a Class A driver's license and as a former notary public who is fond of Norwegian death metal and our dog. Our dog is not fond of you. That is our dog's right.

My wife is fond of parades. I am not. It was my wife who suggested that we join a march through Durham, North Carolina. I was unaware at that time that the marchers included neo-Nazis, Russian oligarchs, several leaders of the Aryan Brotherhood, three of the F.B.I.'s Ten Most Wanted, and Ted Cruz, although my wife is not fond of Ted Cruz. I made some brief remarks to the crowd because I was told that the podium would be unoccupied between appearances by David Duke and Björn Höcke. I wouldn't have otherwise.

Some critics claim that my wife's actions mean that I should recuse myself from the nation's business. I disagree. If you have any further questions, you should speak with my attorney, who is my wife. It has nothing to do with me. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

BRAVE NEW WORLD DEPT.

SCREEN GRAB

How CoComelon conquered children's television.

BY JIA TOLENTINO

For decades, TV was rarely marketed to kids under two. Then YouTube arrived.

Two small children jump into a bubble bath with expressions of dazed, perpetual pleasure. The taller one has hair like molded chocolate, the other's is like a yellow ice-cream swirl. Everything—the walls, the children's skin—looks bouncy, as though it would squeak to the touch. The bubbles are white and opaque, like globs of shaving cream. Music plays, a mixture of giggles and xylophone, with a tune you remember and words you don't. It keeps repeating. White bubble balls appear all over the hands of the children, on their feet, on their arms. The children, once clean, materialize outside the bathtub and do a happy dance.

This is "Bath Song," a two-minute-and-fifty-two-second video produced by the children's-animation juggernaut CoComelon. In the world of babies and toddlers who watch a lot of YouTube, "Bath Song" is "Star Wars," the moon landing, the white Bronco hurtling across a California freeway. It was uploaded in 2018 and is now the fourth most viewed video on the entire platform. It has been watched nearly seven billion times.

Very young children are crazy for CoComelon—a supercharged, brightly colored, Plasticine utopia. The swirly-haired baby is called JJ. He has two older siblings, smiling parents who are endlessly available to make rainbow Popsicles, and a diverse group of friends who attend Melon Patch Academy under the tutelage of the youthful Ms. Appleberry. The scenes are depicted from toddler height; shots typically change every one to three seconds. All shapes are rounded at the corners: by company dictum, there are no sharp edges anywhere, so that nothing in CoComelon can hurt.

What's heaven to babies—plugging one's mouth with silicone, sleeping with one's limbs bound, CoComelon—is the stuff of padded rooms to parents. "Sitting through even a second of CoComelon as an adult is roughly equivalent to spending a thousand years being tortured with red hot pokers in an echo chamber that has been filled with vomit and malfunctioning smoke detectors," a columnist for the *Guardian* wrote recently. The candy-store music, the ultra-synthetic animation, the mixture of slow, bobbing movement and relentless editing—watch it for more than a few minutes, and you feel like you're hallucinating. Where are we? Who are these children? JJ has only two teeth, but he knows the alphabet and plays soccer. What sort of baby is this?

In small children, screen time tends to induce a cycle of fervor, placidity, and withdrawal. Parents on social media refer to "CoComelon zombies" and "Cocainemelon," and a small number of them have fearfully speculated that CoComelon is a direct cause of developmental differences and delays. There is no evidence of this. In fact, many parents of neurodivergent kids use CoComelon fixation as a way of engaging their children with simple social scripts: here's what happens at the doctor, here's how we get into our car seat. The first time I took my daughter to the dentist, at eighteen months old, she was apoplectic. I turned on CoComelon, and she instantly relaxed, happy to lie back in my arms in the big chair.

Television has long played babysitter. In 1948, when WABD, in New York, became the first American station to regularly offer full daytime programming, it issued a press release. "The schedule has been designed to coincide with the average housewife's routine," the station announced. "When the housewife has to wash the breakfast dishes or fix luncheon, for instance, there will be programs designed to keep preschool children occupied and out of her way." Now such programs are available at all hours, which is how often we need them.

ILLUSTRATION BY MOJO WANG

These days, each of us watches a personal screen that presents the things an algorithm has decided will best hold our attention. Kids are inducted into this life style as toddlers, if not before: by 2020, nearly half of two-to-four-year-olds in the United States had their own electronic devices. On YouTube, the attention of small children became a seam of glittering gold for content creators to mine. Some of what has resulted—Ms. Rachel, for instance, a streaming personality whose videos are like FaceTimes with a magical preschool teacher—is thoughtful and playful. Some of it is hypnotic: two-hour streams from the point of view of a train conductor chugging through the lush Welsh countryside, or the ubiquitous videos of disembodied hands opening toy eggs. And some of it is sinister: knockoff "PAW Patrol" face-swap videos, or awful cartoons in which a pregnant, off-brand Minnie Mouse might have a baby who steps on nails and cries.

Then, there is the endless array of programs that seem troublingly habit-forming but otherwise basically harmless: five-year-old influencers who chat about toys, videos that feature inane playacting with popular dolls, and the various animated nursery-rhyme channels of which CoComelon is king. Many parents end up settling on this last option when handing iPads to their toddlers, sometimes with a nagging thought or two in the back of their minds. Who actually makes this stuff, and with what degree of care? Is it all generated by computers following the dictates of some algorithm? Would it matter if it were?

CoComelon releases its videos in twenty-five languages, including American Sign Language, and they are distributed on dozens of streaming services around the world. "CoComelon Lane," a Netflix spinoff that ages the CoComelon babies up to inquisitive talking toddlers, is on its second season. There are CoComelon live events, CoComelon merchandise, and a CoComelon podcast; a feature-length film is in the works. According to Nielsen, CoComelon has been streamed on Netflix for more than thirty billion minutes each year for the past three years. Even as it remains basically unknown to most people who have not semi-recently changed a diaper, it has become one of the most successful entertainment franchises of all time.

What is now the main CoComelon YouTube channel was created, in 2006, by a Korean immigrant couple in Los Angeles: Jay Jeon, a commercial director, and his wife. For years, even after the channel became hugely popular, their identities were a mystery. In 2020, shortly before selling CoComelon to a company called Moonbug, Jeon gave an interview to Bloomberg. He said that his wife had worked as a children's-book author but asked that her name not be published. (He has since retreated into privacy again, and did not respond to requests for an interview.)

Jeon and his wife started out by making animated shorts—ninety seconds long, colorful and clumsy—to amuse their kids: Beethoven's Fifth playing over a ladybug landing on a lion's nose, say, in a video about the letter "L." The YouTube channel soon generated enough ad revenue for the couple to quit their day jobs and hire a small team of employees. In 2015, the videos began featuring children; then the animation switched from a hand-drawn look to slick 3-D, and JJ appeared. YouTube's algorithm buoyed the channel with unprecedented force: during two months in 2017, monthly views doubled, to two hundred and thirty-eight million. A year later, CoComelon was getting two billion monthly views; two years after that, the channel was averaging more than a hundred million viewers every day. Most of these viewers, presumably, could not yet form clear sentences.

Moonbug was founded in London, in 2018, with the aim of acquiring and expanding viral YouTube children's channels. It rapidly grew the CoComelon franchise, hiring writers and getting sixty-minute song compilations on Netflix. Soon, CoComelon was the second most streamed program on that platform and its most popular show among Black, Asian, and Hispanic audiences in the U.S. In 2021, two longtime Disney executives, Kevin Mayer and Tom Staggs, created a "next-generation media company" called Candle Media, with backing from the private-equity firm Blackstone. Among its first purchases was Moonbug, which it acquired for a reported three billion dollars.

Moonbug has nearly five hundred employees and twenty-nine children's-media properties, which originated all over the globe and are produced in many different countries. CoComelon, by far its most successful, is headquartered in the company's Los Angeles office, which is situated among a row of upscale chain storefronts near the Grove. I visited in February. At the entrance, a chalk sign proclaimed "Welcome to Moonbug" above the slogan "Learn. Laugh. Grow." Inside, there was a rack of CoComelon toys in the reception area and, on the wall, collages of adorable fan art, mailed to the company by kids. Otherwise, the place looked like any creative-class content factory: an open-plan maze of people with monitors and headphones, radiating efficiency and a desire to go to lunch.

I was ushered into a conference room, where I spent the next five hours being pleasantly precision-targeted by a choreographed series of presentations and interviews. The chief creative officer at Moonbug, Richard Hickey, previously worked as a director in both children's television and advertising. He and Andy Yeatman, the company's managing director for the Americas and a former Netflix Kids executive, spoke like pitch decks. Moonbug's mission, they said, was to "empower kids all over the world with essential life skills." The company did this by acquiring I.P. with "reach and audience" which displayed core values of "compassion, empathy, and resilience." CoComelon's "creative value was very high," they said, because its creators "love this I.P., love the characters, love the world, and are very intentional with everything we create about it."

We were joined by two creative executives, Meghan Sheridan and Jasmine Johnson, and I peppered them with questions. How old is JJ supposed to be? The kids' ages "stretch" to reflect both the reality and the aspiration of their audience's lives, they said. I asked about JJ's parents, his teacher, the town where CoComelon is set. There were answers to many of my questions in the roughly hundred-page show bible—a guide, for the staff, to CoComelon lore—but the information was mostly proprietary.

I wondered aloud about how the company handled the nuances of being in the business of children's attention. For

a profit-driven enterprise in the streaming era, all-day binges were probably the ideal mode of consumption. "We want kids to watch it for a little while, but the rest of the day should be filled up with exercise and interaction," Hickey said. It was up to caregivers and parents to regulate screen time, he added; Moonbug's job was to create a safe place on that screen. "If your kid is watching our content for half an hour, or fifteen minutes, or however long it might be, you know that nothing bad is going to happen—that they'll be exposed to a very warm world," he said.

I'd read an article in the *Times* in which researchers at Moonbug observed a young child who'd been placed in front of two screens. One screen played a Moonbug show and the other, called the Distractatron, played footage of everyday adult life. Each time the child looked away from the Moonbug screen toward the Distractatron, the researcher made a note—time to tweak the episode. Did the company really design its shows so that kids would never look away? Hickey and Yeatman said that the Distractatron was the work of a third-party research company, and that neither of them had even heard that word before the article was published. Such attentional calculations were not part of their process, Hickey told me, adding, "We use data in creative retrospectively."

The conception of a CoComelon episode, as Hickey described it, involved joyful brainstorming sessions with a "story trust" that includes animation directors, creative executives, and writers. People would bring in their favorite childhood stuffed animals or stories about how hard it is to zip up a child's p.j.'s in the middle of the night. Then, Sheridan told me, they'd identify a "learning takeaway," such as recognizing letters, cultivating empathy, or brushing your teeth. Johnson mentioned an episode called "Hair Wash Day," in which a Black mother washes and styles her son's hair. She said it was particularly meaningful to her that an episode authentically depicted bath-time routines for a Black family. Later, Natascha Crandall, an educational consultant, told me that she and others reviewed early versions of episodes and suggested careful improvements. If a scene showed a kid juggling apples, she'd scratch that—it might impart the accidental takeaway that food was meant to be played with. Also, it wouldn't be appropriate, she said, given that some in the show's audience might be food-insecure.

After lunch, a few members of the music team arrived. An appealingly earnest crew of Berklee graduates, they were led by Eric Kalver, a thirtysomething who comes from a family of children's entertainers. ("My father's a magician, and my mother was a clown," he said.) Someone put an electronic keyboard on the marimba setting and played the CoComelon theme song; I let out an involuntary squeal. The team workshopped a new song, about kids playing with pots and pans, in front of me, adjusting chord structures on the fly, adding flourishes on the ukulele and on the drums. Kalver said that they would probably sample forks and knives as percussion, and add them to the usual xylophones, marimbas, glockenspiels, woodwinds, and laughter. The learning takeaway of this episode was clear: Moonbug was a spontaneous, creative place, telling stories with passion and love.

A few months before my visit, the company had laid off about thirty people, including most of the CoComelon writers and much of its in-house animation team. Bloomberg reported that Moonbug planned to experiment with artificial intelligence. I asked Hickey about this. He told me that Moonbug would continue to "look at what the technology is and where the benefit is, for raising the bar creatively," but that there was "zero" A.I. at work in CoComelon currently. "As you'll see, it's very much flesh and bones all the way through the process," he said. "It's human."

Some of the fears regarding CoComelon and its ilk are not new. Socrates, in Plato's Republic, asks, "Shall we just carelessly allow children to hear any casual tales which may be devised by casual persons, and to receive into their minds ideas for the most part the very opposite of those which we should wish them to have when they are grown up?" Mass media made exposure to tales seem less controllable than ever; in 1935, one parenting expert lamented the radio, saying, "No locks will keep this intruder out, nor can parents shut their children in away from it." "Sesame Street" arrived at the end of the sixties, and though it was hailed as a benchmark in quality programming, some observers speculated that its fast pace would leave kids overstimulated and malcontent. (The version of the show that they saw is Tarkovsky compared with what's on YouTube.) By the end of the eighties, preschool-age children were already watching TV about as much as they currently watch screens, around thirty hours per week.

But CoComelon's core viewership is not preschool-age—it's pre-preschool-age. "I've been in kids' TV for a super, super long time," Susan Kim, a writer in the industry, told me. "It used to be that there were certain things you couldn't say, or you'd be rebuked in the room." Kim, who's written for "CoComelon Lane," worked on "Square One," in the nineteen-eighties; "Thomas & Friends," in the nineties; and "Arthur," in the two-thousands, among many other programs. "For one, you weren't allowed to say that anything was for one-to-two-year-olds," she said. "I think everyone had the sense, whether or not they'd actually read the white papers on it, that children that young should not be planted in front of video and left alone."

That began to change in the late nineties. "Teletubbies," the psychedelic British kids' show featuring colorful alien-baby creatures, began airing in 1997; PBS imported it and marketed it toward children as young as one. Around the same time, the company Baby Einstein started producing videos of puppets and patterns set to classical music. (Disney bought the company in 2001, for a reported twenty-five million dollars.) A few years later, HBO produced "Classical Baby," a soothing, Peabody-winning anthology series featuring a cartoon baby who conducts an all-animal orchestra that plays Aaron Copland and Erik Satie; it has been a staple of my life with young children. These shows inspired controversy in their time, but they were gentle and calm, with the vibes of a peaceful, edifying, possibly stoned afternoon. Even so, when the American Academy of Pediatrics issued its first screen-time guidelines, in 1999, it recommended that kids under two avoid TV altogether.

These guidelines were revised in 2016. The A.A.P. now holds that children under eighteen months can benefit from video chatting, and that kids aged two to four can learn from high-quality ed-

ucational shows; it suggests that they avoid nursery-rhyme channels, fast-paced shows, and YouTube on Autoplay. Research has repeatedly documented connections between early prolonged exposure to television and worse outcomes later in life—language delays, problems with attention and self-regulation. But many of these relationships are likely to be correlational or interactive, not causal. Parents who have less money and fewer enrichment opportunities, or who are racially marginalized, or who struggle with their mental health—frequently overlapping factors—tend to have kids who watch more television. If you can't afford child care or a lot of toys, screen time is always available as a babysitter and a treat. (Although programs such as "Sesame Street" are associated with improvements in children's language and executive functioning, it's hard to know whether this is because of the content or because of the sorts of parents who choose to put it on.)

Jenny Radesky, a developmental behavioral pediatrician, helped author the A.A.P. guidelines. She has been watching and evaluating children's TV shows for years, scoring their educational effectiveness on a scale of zero to two. Ms. Rachel and the PBS program "Daniel Tiger" consistently received twos, she said. CoComelon and Blippi, another Moonbug property, were always ones—neither awful nor excellent. Zero, she said, was for the dregs of YouTube. Another leading researcher, Rachel Barr, who teaches at Georgetown, told me that the YouTube era had produced a lot of shows that were "frenetic, sort of bedazzling, high on the cognitive load." This style drives us to pay attention: our visual systems, Barr said, are geared to reflexively orient toward rapid changes. But it can overwhelm a child's ability to "encode the content," as she put it—that is, to actually learn anything.

The people who create CoComelon might value education, Barr went on, but the metric that would determine Moonbug's profitability was time on-screen. Radesky suggested that the company's priorities were apparent in the way it presented its content. "Just the fact that the compilations are marked thirty minutes, sixty minutes: they know these products are filling a gap created by parents being overworked, not having family leave—who are so stressed that they need to occupy their children for a certain amount of time," she said. Overwork and the absence of child care, she noted, are "systemic issues that keep us from parenting the way we want to." These systemic issues may help explain why, on Netflix in the U.S., CoComelon is particularly popular with nonwhite viewers. In 2020, according to an annual survey by the nonprofit Common Sense Media, white children aged eight and under used mobile devices for an average of thirty-seven minutes a day. That year, Black children of the same age used mobile devices for more than a hundred minutes a day.

Jepha Krieg worked in Moonbug's London office in 2021 and 2022. She was part of a team of about thirty people who repackaged the company's videos into compilations in order to generate more views and more ad revenue. Previously, Krieg had worked as a preschool teacher, and she'd got the impression that kids who watched hours of CoComelon every day had a hard time regulating their emotions. But she wanted to get into online media—she's now a channel manager for a digital-content studio—and Moonbug had a mission of creating educational resources, which sounded great. Her point of view changed once she started working there. "I think they have an excellent P.R. team who know all the buzzwords to make it feel like they're making excellent, culturally relevant, educational content," she told me. "And then they've got thirty-seven people in the back room making fifteen different combinations of the same ten songs over and over."

As part of her job, Krieg would keep an eye on traffic: if a video with a thumbnail image of a certain dog got a lot of views, she'd make a bunch of thumbnails featuring that dog. At first, she said, the compilations were mostly fifteen or thirty minutes long. "Then we were, like, 'Oh, the thirty-minute ones are doing really well—let's try sixty minutes!' 'Those are doing really well—let's try ninety!' 'Let's now have everyone posting two-hour-long compilations on every single channel every single week, hooray.'" Looking through CoComelon's YouTube channels to find the outer length limit, the only channel I found with five-hour compilations of different songs was the one dedicated to Cody, a Black character on the show.

After I visited the Moonbug office in Los Angeles, I looked up some of the company's ex-employees on LinkedIn. I found a post from CoComelon's former head writer, written last fall, announcing the good news that he and his wife had welcomed their second child and the bad news that he'd been laid off four days before the birth. Below the post were comments expressing both

support and confusion. "All new parents owe it to u as ur work has made those early years of our babies engaging and entertaining," one person wrote. Someone else commented, "But . . . isn't that show like taking over the world?"

I ended up speaking to ten people who had worked on CoComelon or associated properties at various points between 2020 and 2023. Most of them requested anonymity—some had signed nondisclosure agreements, others feared professional reprisal. Those who had worked in the L.A. office described it as a chaotic, micromanaged, and morale-depleting place. More broadly, they voiced complaints that echoed what Krieg, the former London employee, had suggested: that the company's stated commitments to education and cultural relevance, including diversity, primarily existed as a rationalization for harnessing the maximum amount of attention from young children around the world. Usually, in children's television, "the audience comes first," one ex-employee, who'd also worked at multiple major networks, told me. "At Moonbug, revenue and analytics is first, audience second."

Multiple people asked if I'd heard about the spreadsheets. CoComelon episodes, they said, were put together with the aid of spreadsheets showing the most popular search terms on YouTube. "Ideally, you want to come up with an engaging idea that has a bunch of those search terms in it," another former employee told me. A lot of parents, harangued by a toddler, will open YouTube and search the word "train." To fulfill this content need, a twenty-one-year-old assistant had co-written a song called "Train Song," which eventually featured in an episode that now has more than a quarter of a billion views. (The assistant told me that she regularly worked ten-hour days and was also tasked with writing scripts. Her starting salary was thirty-six thousand dollars.)

Moonbug said that the spreadsheets do not dictate creative decisions. And one might characterize the executives' approach as basic market research: figuring out what customers want and providing it. Children's television has always been a commercial proposition; even the ad-free "Sesame Street" has produced landfills' worth of trademarked merchandise. But CoComelon's level of top-down engineering—creativity by way of search-engine optimization—is atypical in children's TV, the former employees said. There was a CoComelon master-planning matrix that dictated the year's priorities: episode themes, the number of episodes starring each character. "So it gets to this weird place where you're, like, 'O.K., this week what we need is a Christmas episode set to a classic nursery rhyme, starring Cody, that teaches colors,'" a former employee whom I'll call Quinn said. Another person described writing television for kids as a matter of balancing the reality principle (curricular points, story beats), the superego (notes from the network), and the id—"the juice of the story, the things kids fear and love, the things that make them laugh." Writing for Moonbug, this person added, was ninety per cent superego and maybe eight per cent reality principle, with hardly any room for the id: "Sometimes you start thinking, Gee, if I were ChatGPT, perhaps that would be better for what you want."

CoComelon touts the diversity of its world: of the six main child characters, one is Black, one is Korean, and one is Mexican. Recently, the company took some culture-war heat for an episode of "CoComelon Lane" in which Nico, one of the toddlers, puts on a tutu and dances around with his two dads. Susan Kim, who was hired to write an episode of "CoComelon Lane" about Cece, the Korean character, said that it was to Moonbug's credit that they'd sought out

a Korean American writer. But others described the company as an uncomfortable place for racial minorities and queer people, in part because issues of personal identity were often reduced to marketing opportunities and liabilities. "If we were trying to do a Korean New Year episode, they'd go, 'I think we need to see more data on this,' as a way of tabling the discussion," Quinn said. (Moonbug disputed this.) Nico's two dads had never been cleared to appear on the main CoComelon YouTube channel. "We just wanted to have his parents pick him up from school, and he has two dads, and that's it—they just exist," Quinn said. "But it was always just, like, 'Well, if we do this, we really need to do it right, maybe we'll want to bring in a consultant.'" (Moonbug disputed this as well.) Nina, the Mexican character, had initially been written as Puerto Rican, but two people told me that her ethnicity had been changed because higher-ups believed, and said outright, that a Mexican character would reach a bigger audience. (Moonbug said that changing a character's identity was a normal part of the creative process, and that in this case it had been done with Mexican American and Spanish-language cultural consultants.)

Several people also brought up an incident from 2022, in which a white executive allegedly told a Black executive, who was wearing her hair in locs, "If I'd have known you'd wear your hair like this, I wouldn't have hired you." Soon afterward, the Black executive left the company with a settlement. Public records confirm a worker's-compensation case in California filed by this former executive, citing psychiatric damages. (Moonbug said that it had investigated the incident and concluded that the allegation was false.)

Public financial reports filed in the U.K. show Moonbug bringing in thirty-five million dollars in gross profit in 2020, a hundred million in 2021, and a hundred and sixty-five million in 2022, the first year it turned a net profit. That year, as the show expanded, contracts were extended to animation teams in India and Costa Rica; a group of in-house animators helped train these new teams, then got laid off early last year. CoComelon's streaming numbers are almost unfathomable—an internal e-mail from the first quarter of 2023 shows that its quarterly YouTube streams were at more than sixty billion minutes. Still, according to Bloomberg, Moonbug came in under its earnings targets last year.

A few months before the October layoffs, employees noticed an atypical slowdown in production. Around that time, the writers were instructed to come up with an episode set in a Target store, which would be posted as sponsored con-

tent. At a team-building workshop held one floor above the L.A. office, leadership tried to boost morale, soliciting honest feedback about people's frustrations. Some employees cried, overwhelmed.

Moonbug is the first major kids' studio to use YouTube as a primary distribution platform, and most of its shows—unlike those which originate on Disney or Amazon or Netflix or Apple—are not unionized. Several people told me that the writer responsible for the five highest-performing episodes of 2022 was making seventy-five thousand dollars a year when he got laid off, in October. (Moonbug denied this.) In December, Bloomberg reported that Candle was seeking to restructure its Blackstone debt, which ran to more than a billion dollars. Moonbug, one former employee told me, was regarded as "a cautionary tale by a lot of people in the animation industry, a sign of where the entire industry could go if left unchecked, without protections."

What the former employees described as micromanagement struck me as an attempt to fine-tune the formula behind the show's extraordinary success and render it replicable, scalable, and defensible in perpetuity—a way to add billions of viewing minutes every year, cheaply, and for this to be considered a positive, educational thing. But it's possible that the je ne sais CoComelon is largely a matter of fortunate timing. The show came around just as YouTube was invented, and right before Apple released the iPad. The major animation studios were not producing shows for kids under two. When those children were handed personal electronic devices, the pristine land of their attention was wide open for amateurs to farm. CoComelon found something that kids loved, caught the algorithm's favor, and instigated a feedback loop. The more kids saw it, the more they liked it; the more they liked it, the more they saw it. And so on.

This is not to say that Moonbug has not stewarded CoComelon's success carefully. I asked everyone I talked to if there were any funny internal guidelines for the CoComelon universe. There were, they said—for example, shots in which a kid was on a parent's shoulders were to be avoided, because they would make it glaringly obvious how disproportionately large the kids' heads were. Three people also brought up an executive's dictum about endings: even if an episode was soundtracked by a lullaby, the characters should not go to sleep at the end of it. If they did, kids at home might be encouraged to press Pause, and put the screen away.

In April, I took my daughter, who will soon turn four, to a live CoComelon event in a hotel ballroom in Philadelphia. It featured a disco-dance section, themed photo ops, crafts, and meet and greets with adults dressed as giant, mascot-like versions of the show's characters. When we arrived, at ten in the morning, it was packed. The children, many of them in CoComelon clothing, screamed with elation; expressionless parents held up phones to capture their joy. The CoComelon version of "The Wheels on the Bus" played over loudspeakers, and I had the uncanny feeling that something from deep inside my computer had breached the realm of the real.

Even if Moonbug was not currently using A.I. to replace creative labor, some former employees told me, the writing seems to be on the wall. *Wired* recently analyzed several YouTube channels that closely mimic CoComelon and found evidence of generative A.I. in the music and the writing. Jeffrey Katzenberg, a cofounder of DreamWorks—which is reportedly developing the CoComelon movie—has suggested that ninety per cent of animation work will someday be done by A.I. There have been two more rounds of layoffs at Moonbug this year. Two people speculated that Candle Media was hoping to sell Moonbug to Disney—Staggs and Mayer have rejoined the Disney board, as advisers—and that the company, having exhausted its growth-mode options, was trying to engineer an attractive balance sheet for a sale.

There is not much that one individual—a parent, a person working at an animation company—can do to change the stark financial incentives of the attention economy, or the constraints on family life that make screen time so attractive. I have found myself wondering if we'd be better off thinking less about educational value in children's media and more about real pleasure, both for us and for our kids. "The best kids' TV feels very bespoke," Susan Kim told me. "If you're a child, it feels like it was made for you. It feels intense and absorbing, imaginative and free and wonderful and scary and funny." It can feel like this even on the days that you cling to screen time like a raft in a thrashing ocean. Recently, all four people in my household got the stomach flu simultaneously. We lay on the floor of the living room and watched "Classical Baby" on repeat—all six episodes, three times in a row. I felt delight, even then, and dimly recalled one of the conclusions about screen time which is most strongly backed by research: the TV that is best for kids is whatever a parent will sit down and watch with them.

I often feel that the anxiety I have about my kids' screen time comes mainly from sublimated disappointment in myself. The most frightening studies I've seen found that parents, when using smartphones, respond to their children's needs less, play with them less, and show decreased sensitivity and warmth. Parental device usage correlates strongly with children's device usage; the average adult spends some four and a half hours each day looking at her phone. When it comes to the shows we allow our children to watch, we are afraid of—what, exactly? That our kids' capacity for deep thought will be blunted by compulsive screen use? That they'll lose their ability to sit with the plain fact of existence, to pay attention to the world as it is, to conceive of new possibilities? That they'll grow up to be just like us, only worse?

At the ballroom in Philadelphia, after a bubbly pigtailed performer led the kids through a round of the Chicken Dance, the enormous mascot versions of JJ and Cody came out, their heads bigger than beach balls. Everyone ran toward them as if Taylor Swift and Beyoncé had just emerged in our midst. My daughter, suddenly self-conscious, shrank into herself—most of the children, unlike her, were still wearing diapers and clutching pacifiers. Still, when it was time to leave, she was inconsolable. We had to get on a bus to a train to a subway to another subway, and it was becoming a whole scene, us in the hotel lobby. I pulled out her tablet and her headphones and turned on "Finding Nemo," a movie made by an enormous corporation about a parent who tries, unsuccessfully, to protect his son from the beautiful, overwhelming, treacherous world. ♦

ANNALS OF CELEBRITY

HIS BEAUTIFUL DARK TWISTED FANTASY

Ye bought a masterpiece by Tadao Ando—and gave it a violent remix.

BY IAN PARKER

Tony Saxon is a wiry, tattooed man in his early thirties who is proud of what he calls his "Jersey gonzo" work ethic—that is, "I've got a guy, or I'll get a guy." His legal surname is Netelkos, but he prefers the one that his father adopted while performing as a lounge singer with an Elvis-inspired act. The younger Saxon had a sometimes chaotic and druggy youth; he now sustains himself with Red Bull and can talk loudly and without interruption—but still with some charm—for four or five hours. When we recently met in Boyle Heights, in East Los Angeles, he arrived in a 1963 Ford Thunderbird convertible.

Four years ago, Saxon moved to California from northern New Jersey and sublet an apartment in North Hollywood. He worked on TV commercials and as a handyman; he played in bands and recorded music. In September, 2021, a woman who introduced herself as Bianca inquired about his availability for construction work. He was available. A few days later, she texted, asking him to come to Malibu immediately. In a response that eventually led to a lawsuit against Ye, formerly Kanye West—the music and fashion star who in the past two years has become known for his public antisemitism and admiration of Hitler—Saxon said that he'd get his tools.

He drove down to the Santa Monica Pier, then headed northwest on the Pacific Coast Highway. For about ten miles, the road follows the ocean's edge: if you live on the beach, you also live next to a four-lane highway. But just past the Malibu Pier the highway and the ocean separate, and for a few miles the beachfront properties line a calm residential street, Malibu Road, with speed bumps and dog-walkers. Stan Laurel used to live here.

The houses stand shoulder to shoulder, allowing little more than a glimpse of sky between them. Saxon pulled up to a two-story façade of smooth gray concrete. On the upper floor, the surface was interrupted only by an arrow-slit window; at street level, there was a wooden garage door, and a front door and a window, both made of milkily opaque glass.

A few months earlier, when the house had had a different owner, a visitor would have entered a little gallery-like space, with concrete walls and gray limestone floor tiles, filled with contemporary art. The house withholds its big Pacific reveal, and the clouded glass casts the gallery in pale light. The art here once included photographs of nuclear-weapons-test clouds and a life-size statue of a man, no longer in his youth, with his fists in a boxer's pose. The sculpture, cast in aluminum and painted blue, is by the French artist Xavier Veilhan. It is a likeness of Tadao Ando, the Pritzker Prize-winning Japanese architect.

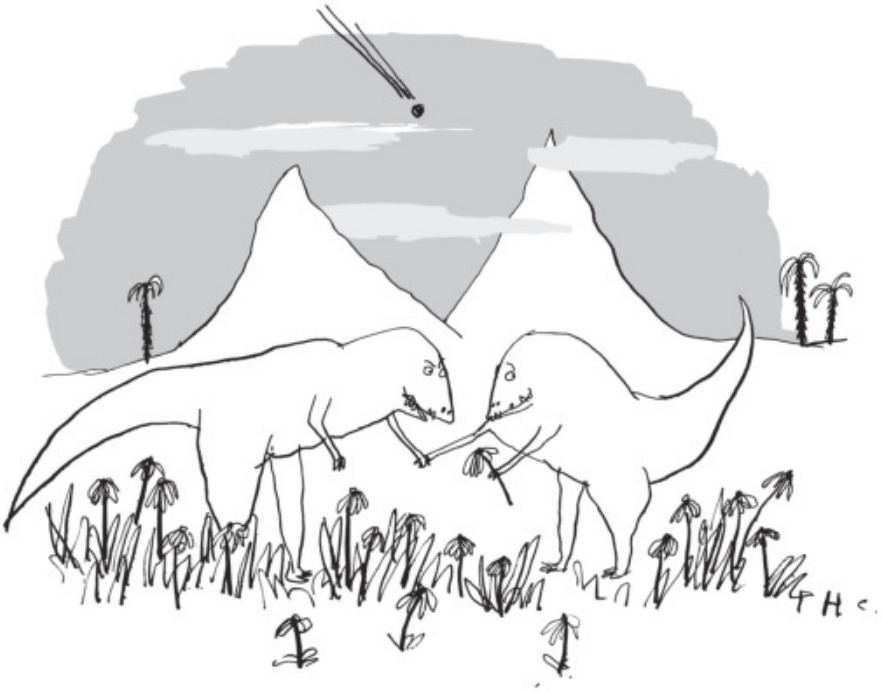
Ando, who had a brief boxing career, designed the house. Now eighty-two, he has kept his practice small. He has one office, in his home city of Osaka, and has never employed more than thirty people. He works on only a few designs each year. Some are museums; many are houses; nearly all, including the house on Malibu Road—finished in 2013, for Richard Sachs, a former money manager—are made of concrete, poured on-site, and left unclad and unpainted, indoors and out. In what has become an Ando signature, the concrete's velvety surface is marked by evenly spaced holes—small and shallow enough to be plugged by, say, a marshmallow.

The Malibu Road house has about four thousand square feet of indoor space. Another property of this scale, on this street, might sell for twenty million dollars. When Sachs put his house on the

In 2021, Ye paid $57.3 million for the house,

in Malibu. He admired Ando, and wanted an Ando, but didn't "like the interior," one of the architect's former colleagues says.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SPENCER LOWELL



"Well, if it's anything like the last million years, I think we have a lot to look forward to."

• •

market, in 2020, he asked for seventy-five million. Sachs's price, like his aluminum statue, suggests the extent to which an appreciation of Ando can take the form of veneration. For very wealthy people who spend some of their wealth on art, no living architect seems more likely to make them feel that they're buying not just a fine home but the work of a major modern artist. An Ando house will require expensive and exacting construction; it will have a controlled, sober beauty that photographs well and that plainly communicates contemporary, if not avant-garde, taste. And it will be rare. The client will receive personal validation of the most tangible, bombproof kind. Ando has said that, after being introduced to potential clients, "my decision to accept their projects depends mainly on their personality and aura." An American real-estate agent who has had some interactions with Ando recently told the *Wall Street Journal* that "it was like working with God."

Saxon was let into the Malibu Road house by Bianca Censori, the woman who had texted him; she was in her twenties. The house is a box partially embedded in the continent's last, low step of land. The structure then stretches over the sand, propped up by four pillars at about the high-tide mark. (The beach here is narrow.) Although the house appears from the street to be two stories, the front door is on the middle of three floors—the main floor. A short corridor leads from the gallery to an open living area where the house delivers its vast, binary view of sky and ocean, through floor-to-ceiling windows.

Censori mentioned that the house, which was empty of furnishings, had a new owner, but she didn't name him. A few other people were around; they had ladders and tools. One or two were identified as co-workers of Censori's and, like her, were dressed all in black. Others, like Saxon, had been summoned that day. Walking around, Saxon registered bathroom walls lined in marble—"gorgeous black-and-white marble, like something in a New York hotel in the nineteen-twenties," he told me—and custom wooden cabinetry that, he estimated, had cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Downstairs, the ceilings were lower than on the main floor. Three rooms, each with a little bathroom, had ocean views. There was also a laundry, and a room where Saxon saw devices that controlled the house's heating and other systems. On the upper floor, two extravagantly wide staircases—more suggestive of a college library than of a beach house—descended to the main floor. One staircase was inside, one was outside: they ran alongside each other, separated by a wall built partly of glass. At the bottom of the outdoor staircase was a courtyard with a fire pit. At the top was a concrete hot tub. The top floor was mostly terrace, with the primary bedroom opening onto it. Sachs once kept a sculpture of the Incredible Hulk, by Jeff Koons, midway up the indoor staircase. In this area, Saxon noticed, Censori's black-clad colleagues were doing something involving large blocks of foam. He remembered being told that they were turning the stairs into a slide.

Later—as the house's interior was dismantled—Saxon would spend nights here, sleeping on a mattress on the floor, surrounded by Clif Bars and Red Bulls, and bothered by seagulls. Later still, Censori would become a fixture of the paparazzi-oriented media, as the romantic partner of the house's owner: Ye. For nearly a year, Censori, who is Australian and had studied architecture at the University of Melbourne, had been working for him on various design projects, alongside other young architects. Saxon saved her number on his phone under "Bianca architect." (Censori did not respond to requests for comment.)

In the fall of 2021, Ye was forty-four, and his wealth was estimated to be nearly two billion dollars, thanks in part to fashion deals with Adidas and the Gap. That February, his wife, Kim Kardashian, had filed for divorce. Saxon, who's unimpressed by most music recorded after 1969, now takes some pride in having been oblivious of whom Censori meant when she referred to "the owner," and why there was some hubbub in the street and a security guard posted outside. People paying closer attention to Ye's life might have read a TMZ story, published a few days before Saxon's visit, headlined "KANYE WEST DROPS A WHOPPING $57.3 MILLION FOR MALIBU HOME/SCULPTURE."

Censori asked Saxon to paint over the shelves, cabinets, and closets—along

with the bathroom marble—in a shade that would disguise the boundaries between these surfaces and the untreated concrete of the walls. She said of the owner, "He doesn't want any of the wood to show." Saxon had a moment's pause: the paint would look bad (and soon peel off). But he likes to contrast his pluck with what he perceives to be uniform lassitude among Californians, and he didn't protest. He gave Censori a quote and drove off to buy paint samples.

That afternoon, Saxon did some test-painting on sections of wood. Censori sent photographs of these to the owner. They waited. Censori then told Saxon to remove all the wood; she allowed him to call a friend to help. That day, Saxon recalled, he and his colleague "ripped the cabinets out, we ripped the entire laundry-room wood out." They worked all night, filling the garage with splintered pieces. Saxon eventually went home to sleep.

A few hours later, Censori woke him with a call: "Do you think you could come help me get the foam off the stairs?" She meant now. "And he wants to meet you," she added.

In 2001, Tom Ford, the fashion designer and filmmaker, bought twenty-two thousand acres of land in northern New Mexico. He asked his preferred architect, Ron Radziner, of the L.A. firm Marmol Radziner, to design some buildings for the new property. But, as Radziner recently recalled, Ford also requested permission to stray, architecturally: "Tom said, 'I'm not going to do this if you really don't want me to. But how would you feel if I hired Tadao Ando to do the horse facility?' " Radziner, who admires Ando—it's always "Mr. Ando," in his telling—approved, and offered to become Ando's local "executive architect" (in charge of permits and planning) and general contractor.

To secure Ando's blessing, Radziner flew to Japan. Ando's career had been founded, in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, on ingenious single-family homes, often on tight city lots in Osaka. After Ando won the Pritzker, in 1995, his practice became increasingly international. Kulapat Yantrasast, a Thai-born architect, joined Ando's firm in 1996, and came to spend much of his time overseas, frequently on projects for fashion-world figures. In France, he worked on a house, never built, for Karl Lagerfeld. In Italy, he oversaw the construction of a theatre in Milan for Giorgio Armani. Yantrasast, who now has his own practice, told me that such clients often have feelings of awe, touched with envy, for the rooted solidity of an Ando building. The work "is mysterious, it's *anchored*, it has such a quiet presence," Yantrasast said. "Whereas fashion and music are about dynamics and movement and change."

Ando once wrote that it would be hard for him to build a house in America, because he wasn't "familiar with Americans." But by the time Radziner visited Osaka, in 2001, things had changed. Ando had designed a house in Chicago for Fred Eychaner, a media entrepreneur, and two institutional buildings: the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, in St. Louis, and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, where a reflecting pool generates a mirrored double of the concrete-and-glass façade.

Ando's Osaka studio is about the size of a large town house, and is organized around an atrium. Alex Iida, an American architect who joined Ando's staff in 2010, has described the studio as "five stories up, two stories down, and one big void in the middle," adding, "So, pretty much, we can hear everything that's going on." Radziner recalled that, during his visit, he witnessed an impromptu staff meeting. Ando's usual workstation, at the bottom of the void, put him right by the office's only phones. That day, Ando had overheard a staff member's phone conversation that didn't sit right with him, and he had called the meeting to say so. He stood at the bottom, making his complaint to employees arranged above.

That scene of staff supervision, or surveillance, has an analogue in the way an Ando work is meant to be experienced. With a client's assent, an Ando house makes unignorable decisions about how people, and light, should behave in it. Ando has stressed the importance of a "coexistence" between humans and nature, and his designs often try to thwart a too sharp division between indoor and outdoor life, to the extent that a client's art collection allows. A famous early house in Osaka was unheated, and obliged its inhabitants to cross a courtyard to reach the bathroom. Ando has said that when the client "came to me and asked me what he would do when it became too cold in the house, I told him to wear a sweater. When he asked me what would happen if it got even colder, I told him to wear many sweaters."

Some contemporary architects foreground the idea of a building's future flexibility. Ando isn't one of them. Yantrasast, in explaining his decision to leave Ando's studio, in 2003, told me that he wanted to explore a less "controlling" architecture. He said that he'd once shared with Ellsworth Kelly, the artist, a worry that people might dismiss his post-Ando designs, which have often used concrete, as mere offsprings. Kelly, reassuring him, contrasted what he described as the prescribed severity of Ando's spaces with the more "open-minded" aesthetic of Yantrasast's.

Ando's method for casting a concrete wall on-site is unremarkable in its fundamentals. A contractor fashions a narrow rectangular mold from plywood sheets. One way of helping the mold withstand the weight of wet concrete is to pass metal rods, known as form ties, horizontally through the width of the box. Each tie has two nuts on it that are tightened against the plywood mold's interior. The concrete is then poured in, typically over a forest of vertical rebar. After the concrete dries, the contractor removes the wood, the ends of the ties, and the nuts—leaving little holes, which can be filled in or not.

Ando requires contractors to do all this with unusual precision, and he carefully manages the effect of the lines where one sheet of plywood meets another, and the pattern of the tie holes. But, as Radziner came to realize when he visited numerous Ando projects in Japan, the result isn't immaculate. "They're striving for perfection, but it's not about *actual* perfection," he said. The concrete may dip a little around the tie holes, like around the button of a mattress; it will have

tiny cracks and variations in color. "And that's what makes concrete concrete," Radziner said. "You feel the nature of it, the strength of it." He has wondered whether some of Ando's international clients miss the point when they decide to use white cement in the concrete mix: "You think, Oh, that could be plaster." Radziner is confident that Ando's preference is for uncolored concrete, whose hue of gray is determined, in part, by local materials.

Radziner began work on the Tom Ford project. Ando's designs came to include a low house and a reflecting pool. (Ford dropped the idea of building a mausoleum for the future remains of himself, his husband, and their fox terriers.) Construction wasn't quite done when, in 2007, Radziner first heard from Richard Sachs, who had retired in his forties after working at such firms as Bear Stearns and Salomon Brothers. Ando had agreed to design him a house in Malibu, and had recommended Radziner as executive architect.

At Radziner's office, in West L.A., he showed me photographs of the Sachs House under construction. The process required many times as much concrete as a more ordinary American house of the same size. The walls and floors were made of thick concrete. Twelve concrete caissons were built, reaching sixty feet beneath the dirt—or the sand, on the ocean side. "You do it at low tide," Radziner explained. "But you're still pumping water out as the concrete's dropping in." Underground, the caissons are cylindrical, but, where they are visible, holding the house about fifteen feet above the beach, they're square in section. That's a pain to do. But such effort "is all about the look," Radziner told me. During construction, which began in 2009, technical drawings, sometimes annotated by Ando, were in constant transmission between Osaka and L.A. An Ando lieutenant visited Malibu Road every few months; Ando himself made perhaps half a dozen visits.

"Mr. Ando is brilliant in an almost cinematic way," Radziner told me. Ando stages an interior like a director: "As you turn, you experience another view. Maybe the ceiling is a little low—you feel the weight of that—and then you move through, and, suddenly, the ceiling pops up, and there's this expansive space." We looked at images of the wide staircases. "To do that on a small site in Malibu is a bold move," Radziner said, adding that it's unusual to find a client who will value "the experience of space more than how much quote-unquote usable floor space he has." (Asked about how accepting Sachs was of the *wabi-sabi* flaws in the concrete, Radziner smiled, then said, "*Pretty* good.")

The house was finished in 2013. From the kitchen, which had stainless-steel surfaces, one could survey the ocean over a glass-topped dining table with blue-cushioned chairs. Above the table, Sachs hung a painting of a nude figure by the New York-based artist George Condo. (While the house was under construction, Condo painted five alternative covers for Ye's 2010 album, "My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy.")

By 2013, Ando had executed fewer than ten commissions in the U.S. So it's an odd coincidence that, while the Sachs House was being built, another team was putting up another Ando house in Malibu, just four miles west. As Radziner phrased it, "We were working on the Little Ando, and that was the Big Ando."

The Big Ando was designed for Maria and Bill Bell, whose wealth derives, in part, from TV soap operas created by Bill's parents, including "The Young and the Restless." These clients had first shown Yantrasast their site in early 2003: eight acres on a bluff overlooking the Pacific.

In Yantrasast's favorable description, an Ando museum can have the air of a home that has expanded to accept institutional duties. Ando was now increasingly being asked to flip that equation, and design homes built on a museum-like scale for members of what Yantrasast calls the "art-collecting communities." Ando designed more than thirty thousand square feet of space for the Bells, including a gallery that could comfortably display a ten-foot-high Koons sculpture, on a plinth, representing piled-up lumps of Play-Doh.

Yantrasast calls the Big Ando, finished in 2015, "one of the best houses in America." Radziner agrees that it's remarkable. But, he noted, "it's white concrete. That's all about perfection." The Little Ando, he said, was more special. "I love this house," he said. "It's the classic gray. So I think that Mr. Ando really loves it, too."

In 2007, several years after Ye's career had taken off—first, as a producer for Jay-Z and other hip-hop stars, then with his own albums—Ye started a blog largely about art, design, and architecture. As a child, in Chicago, Ye would read *Architectural Digest* in a local Barnes & Noble; he was briefly enrolled at Chicago's American Academy of Art. On the blog, he added approving captions to images found online; they showed work by, among others, the architects Moshe Safdie, Rem Koolhaas, and Ando. Beneath a photograph of a cable-railway station in Austria designed by Zaha Hadid, he wrote, "I want my future now!" Ye, who declined to participate in this article, sometimes relaxed into a Martha Stewart-like idiom. A photograph of three dozen rounded gray cushions piled on a floor, like a rock slide, was captioned with a warning that the visual impact of such an arrangement would be diminished by, say, "a 6 year old Ikea coffee table with a stack of 30 magazines and some hard back books with the old paper covers still on em which, sidebar, should have been removed." In the three years that Ye maintained the blog, images of architectural spectacle—a tree house resembling an eyeball, the world's largest swimming pool—increasingly shared space with examples of residential minimalism in Scandinavia and Japan.

Ye and Kim Kardashian began a romantic relationship in 2012. Ye seems to have often taken the design lead in the partnership—a scene in "Keeping Up with the Kardashians" from that year shows him gently urging her to toss out much of her wardrobe. They worked together on readying a house for themselves, in Bel Air, that was neither futuristic nor minimalist. Its terra-cotta-tiled roof and ochre outer walls suggested Portofino (or "Curb Your Enthusiasm"). Oana Stănescu, the Romanian architect, was speaking as a Ye design adviser when she told *W* magazine that the Bel Air mansion was "so bad, seriously—it couldn't be any worse." The same article, from 2013, describes Ye working on new songs while Googling modernist legends. ("How do you spell Mies van der Rohe?") That fall, he visited the Harvard Graduate School

of Design, at the invitation of students. "The world can be saved through design," he told them. "And everything needs to actually be architected." Stănescu helped strip away the ornamentation on the Bel Air house, giving it an oddly denuded, shaved-cat silhouette.

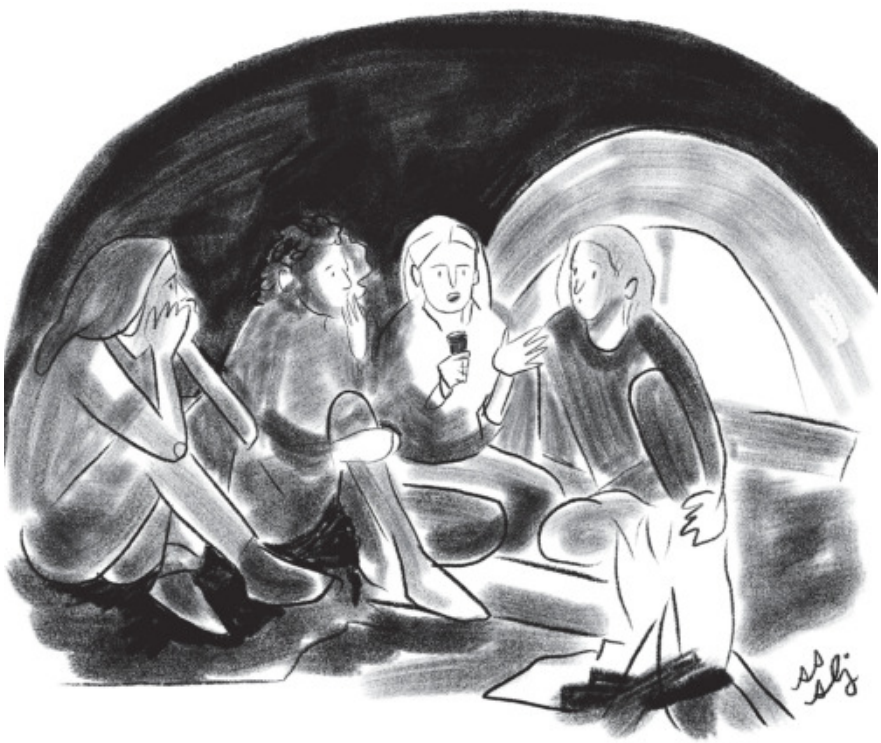
Kardashian and Ye didn't stay long. In 2014, the year of their wedding, they bought a much larger house in Hidden Hills, a gated community northwest of L.A., which posed similar design challenges: the listing called it a "French Country pièce de résistance"; Ye has called it a McMansion. With this house, Ye, whose music career was founded on an unmatched ability to make something beguiling and new out of music recorded years earlier, undertook what could be thought of as an attempt to test the limits of remodelling. Could some version of minimalism be jammed into a suburban mansion with such farm-housey details as shutters and exposed beams? The makeover was executed by Stănescu and Axel Vervoordt, the Belgian interior designer, among others. Ye aptly characterized the resulting look as "futuristic Belgian monastery." A client drawn equally to spareness and to architectural bravura ended up with a sprawling interior so relentlessly off-white that judging distances must have been a challenge. It's minimalism, but it's also a lot. In 2018, Kardashian, who at that point had three children with Ye—their fourth was born the following year—spoke to *Architectural Digest* about living with them in a house furnished largely with pale blobs: "I run around the house with towels. You do have to just take a deep breath and say, 'Okay, it's going to happen.'"

That year, Ye invited "architects and industrial designers who want to make the world better" to work with him on a new venture, Yeezy Home. An Instagram post by one of his designers indicated that the mission would include making affordable housing with precast concrete. By then, Ye had built a spectacularly successful mass-market fashion career, in partnership with Adidas. (He'd also aligned himself with President Donald Trump and suggested that slavery in the U.S. had been consensual.) The progress of Yeezy Home, which lacked a multinational corporate partner like Adidas, was hard to discern; it had to be inferred, in part, from drone photographs of experimental domed structures that Ye had erected in Calabasas, California, and in Cody, Wyoming. But the consistent suggestion was that Ye's reach in music and fashion could be replicated in the built environment. "I'm going to be one of the biggest real-estate developers of all time," he said.

One evident influence was James Turrell, best known for his monumental and still unfinished land-art project at Roden Crater, in Arizona. For decades, Turrell has moved hundreds of thousands of tons of earth at the site, building chambers, connected by tunnels, that frame views of sky. Ye once told *GQ* that, the first time he and Turrell spoke, on the phone, "I was literally screaming at the top of my lungs about how important it was for us to work together." (This conversation likely occurred after the summer of 2015, when Drake—with whom Ye developed a long beef—shot the video for his hit "Hotline Bling" inside an uncredited imitation of Turrell's work.) Turrell, now in his eighties, has kept people away from his crater during its remodelling, but he has made exceptions for potential donors to the project. In 2018, he gave Ye what he recently remembered as a "full day and night tour." To Turrell's surprise, Ye later made good on an offer to contribute ten million dollars. On Ye's birthday the next year, Turrell gave him a sketched design of a house.

By this point, Ye had publicly discussed a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Documentary footage shot in 2018 and 2019, leaked online but never released as a film, shows behavior that one could reasonably connect to that diagnosis. In one sequence, Ye, wearing a MAGA hat, forces a political seminar on captive employees at a private-jet terminal in Chicago, shortly before flying off for an Oval Office meeting with Trump. (Later that day, in D.C., Ye is seen telling Jared Kushner by phone that he'll keep his appointment at the White House only if he can enter the building "the exact way that a foreign dignitary would.") The footage also shows Ye urging employees to build what he calls a "Turrell space" in four months, and enthusing about a proposed foam object that could be "a toilet *and* a bathtub *and* a shower *and* a couch." He inspects a prototype dome, with a hole in the roof, and says that it could equally serve as a homeless shelter or an orphanage.

Ye appears to have been working toward a space in which he and his family could live—in one scene from the documentary, Kardashian advises him



"Soon, she was apologizing for apologizing . . . and then she reflexively apologized for that!"

that her closet area should include a bathroom—as well as a larger community around him, and a housing template that could satisfy millions. On a monitor, a fly-through animation reveals various enormous Turrell-like structures while a narrator describes "a community of the future . . . a new way of life for the entire universe." The camera catches the moment when the minimalist architect Claudio Silvestrin, who had once renovated a SoHo apartment for Ye, first sees an architectural drawing of the imagined community. The scale dawns on Silvestrin: there are dozens of circles on the page, each representing a separate structure. "I didn't realize it was so big," he says. Then, collecting himself, "O.K. So you would like a proposal." (Ye and various collaborators, including the Swiss architect Valerio Olgiati, have spoken of building a city in the Middle East or an underground campus in Wyoming.)

The documentary underlines an obvious point: it's hard to do architecture in bursts of enthusiasm and grandiosity. Ye is serious about buildings—we see him flicking through a book about Archigram, the experimental British architectural group of the nineteen-sixties and seventies—and he has unusual reserves of creative insight and energy, as he has at times himself observed. ("I am Warhol. . . . I am Shakespeare in the flesh.") His urgency can be attractive; as he once said, in a conversation with a design publication, "I don't want to be dead when the world starts getting good." When Olgiati worked with him, he praised Ye's radicalism and called him "probably the most interesting client that an architect can have." But the path from an idea to a built thing is long, expensive, collaborative, and difficult to reverse. You can't prototype a dozen city blocks, as you can a dozen sneakers or songs, and then pick the one that works best. And it's hard not to think that, with Turrell, Ye started in the wrong place. Ye once tweeted, "We all will live in Turrell spaces." More accurately: we won't. Turrell's hallmark Skyspace installations, of which there are more than eighty around the world, are exposed to the elements. Their acoustics can be challenging. There's certainly nowhere to cook or wash. These are places that allow people to reset their sense of space and time—an eclipse-like experience, without the eclipse. Yet, even in the world's most benign climates, they don't point to a new paradigm of shelter.

The documentary shows that, in what appears to be less than two years, Ye met, separately, with several of the world's best-known architects, including David Adjaye, Toyo Ito, and Jacques Herzog, of the firm Herzog & de Meuron. (As Ye clarified, with a laugh, in his 2018 track "Kids See Ghosts," "Herzog and de Meuron, in an office out in Basel/No, not Miami—*Switzerland*.") And, on a trip to Japan, Ye and Kardashian visited the island of Naoshima, where the Chichu Art Museum, a largely underground structure designed by Ando, includes a Turrell Skyspace. (Ye has rapped about being "in Japan with Tadao Ando.")

Ye's interactions with famous architects in this period—echoing his tendency to enlist a multitude of collaborators to contribute to an album—included reaching out to at least one other major international figure. In a recent conversation, this architect, who requested anonymity, told me that some of his senior partners met with Ye in L.A. (The architect couldn't join.) Ye insisted on flying everyone, that evening, to Roden Crater, where he acted as a guide. "My guys came back to me with more questions than answers," the architect said, dryly. He added, "My understanding is that he'll ask one architect, and then another, and they would not know that the other was working on the same thing."

HALF HOUR TO ABERDOUR

Late August, your estuary, now
Flattens gray, and the eroded
Pilings stagger from landfall
Like upside-down legs, or
Geometric marks you see in
Generations of outdated
Cave-wall photographs—all
Finger flute and crosshatch. What
Chases the glint of
Light off the water
Flattens, too, or flatters, the
Chiselled horizon beneath
Clouds so shaved white
They take shape, beneath this
Sky, as humps, or
Hulks, or afterlives of hills,
As if to ask,
"*Where will you return*?"
Here, Sir Patrick Spens
And his good lords
Capsized so deep under the
Sea in the rain-black, ballad
Passages of the Norton anthology
Of poetry in English, it's still scarcely
English at all. Or was it four
Thousand miles from here, in my
Loch Lomond Boulevard
Bedroom, in Harris County,
Texas, where the square
Windows inside the flowing
Foam of the wall open into waves
Of knockout roses, which in
Summer are straining red,
Unheard, under the fathoms of
Hardly visible miles—what I wish

I might have called tawny
Scores of star music, or swollen
Petals, or shy air, or common
Ground, had I known,
At the time, that I'd one day
Feel like the last
Jew alive, with no
Children in the future
To stand before him, bare-
Handed, bareheaded,
Like a sailor of gravity
Through a lifetime of settling
Down as fog or leaves
Or a stone rolling soft as rain—
As if the sea is always inside him
And his mind a floating cloud
Sloping into the marshlight
Unfurling in a daydream
Brimmed with the tresses of three
Confabulating hot-air balloons
To remind him of the voices
Of glitter and foam, spiral or opal,
Like slate-gray voices of the dead.
How many questions to pose about
Rotting and ocean, or mud and sky,
Cloudburst, or downpour,
Are fit for a life of poems?
A man's face blooms up, or sinks,
And the waves are windrows that
Buffet over the sounding of his mouth,
A misery any man takes to
Heart from ridiculously old-fashioned lore
Lying at the bottom of the ocean's floor.

—David Biespiel

In the Arizona desert, Ye had been "full of visions," but "the feeling was that there is something about architecture that requires a little bit of contemplation. And, maybe, a little bit of patience."

Ye has described Ando as the world's "greatest living architect" and "the Ye of all the architects." He and Kardashian often visited the Big Ando in Malibu. In 2019, the year before Ye ran for President, Kardashian bought some land in La Quinta, California, southeast of Palm Springs. Later, after the couple separated, she applied for permits to build a house on this land, designed by Ando. In 2023, Kardashian posted photographs of herself in the Osaka studio, sitting with Ando and his colleague Alex Iida at a desk on which were strewn renderings of the house. Designs posted online show a form that, from above, resembles a guitar pick with a hole at its center. "Met with the master himself," Kardashian wrote. "So deeply honored and incredibly humbled to have the opportunity to work with him." (The house reportedly will have a footprint exceeding half an acre.)

In June, 2021, Ye and the model Irina Shayk, whom he was said to be dating, visited Château La Coste, an estate in southern France that is dotted with sculptural and architectural works by Frank Gehry, Jean Nouvel, Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers, and others. He was photographed walking next to a concrete Ando wall that runs alongside a little lake into which an Ando pavilion juts.

The next month, Ye gave a concert at the Mercedes-Benz Stadium, in Atlanta, to preview likely tracks on an impending album, "Donda." Then he stayed. For several weeks, at a reported cost of a million dollars a day, he lived and recorded in the stadium. His accommodations were both minimal and imperial: he slept in a narrow bed in the corner of a small, windowless, harshly lit room of painted cinder blocks, in a building that seats seventy thousand people, with a roof that can open to form a circle against the sky.

Later that summer, after a second concert in Atlanta and one in Chicago—where the centerpiece of the staging was a replica of the sixteen-hundred-square-foot house in which he'd spent much of his childhood—Ye released "Donda." (The album was named for his late mother.) He also bought the Sachs House.

His intention, always, was to reimagine it. Up to then, Ye's architectural achievements had been mixed. Despite his design literacy, his access to half of the world's best architects, and his almost limitless funds, he had never built an enduring, finished structure from the ground up. (And in September, 2019, he demolished the prototype domes in Calabasas after the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works started asking about permits.) But he was pleased with what he'd been able to do in Hidden Hills. There, playing the role of producer, or curator, he'd shaped "an iconic home that informs a lot of other people's homes," as he put it in 2020. (That's fair: Kardashian has three hundred and sixty-two million Instagram followers.) Ye admired Ando, and wanted an Ando, for reasons that at the time may have included spousal competitiveness, but he didn't love *this* Ando. Kulapat Yantrasast, who later discussed the matter with Ye, told me, "To be honest, he did not like the house—he did not like the interior."

Soon after Ye bought the house, someone representing him called Ron Radziner. Ye wanted to meet on Malibu Road the next day. Radziner was unavailable, so he dispatched two colleagues. The house they saw that morning was just as they'd left it, eight years earlier. Ye welcomed them and introduced them to

James Turrell, who has a long white beard. According to the visitors, Turrell, describing the house as a work of art, said, "There's nothing for me to do here."

But Ye detailed improvements that he wanted Radziner's firm to make. These included removing the cabinetry and replacing the stairs with ramps. Radziner told me that, when he heard of these directives, he said to himself, "This is crazy. If someone wants everything different, *just go build something else*." Radziner knew Turrell a little and e-mailed him. Turrell called right back. Radziner recalled Turrell saying, "Kanye's capable of doing good work. But I think what you have to do is just put it to him: 'These are the things we're willing to do. And these are the things we're not.'"

Radziner told Ye that his firm would happily take out the cabinetry but was unable to do much more. Ye didn't reply.

When Censori summoned Saxon back to the house, a few hours after he'd left it, he was exhausted. "I stink, I haven't showered for two days," he recalled. "I'm a lunatic."

He drove back to Malibu, arriving in the early afternoon. Ye was at the house; it had been a few weeks since his rebuff by Radziner. According to Saxon, Ye told him, "I've heard a lot about you. You're like a hurricane! I like you. I like your style." As they walked through the stripped rooms, Ye kept asking, "You got this out? You did this?"

He began to describe his plans for the house. Saxon asked, "Are you telling me this hypothetically, or do you want me to do it?" Ye wanted him to do it. As Saxon saw it, "He was so sick of everyone around him." Saxon demurred; he didn't have a company or a license. He was just a dude with a minivan and some stamina. "But he goes, 'You *can do it!* Don't give me that. You can do this! Don't say no!'" Recalling this, Saxon laughed. "Some inspiring shit!"

Saxon warmed to Ye, and not just because of the flattery. "I'm not in any way familiar with his music," he told me. "But I kind of got him. We are very similar in a lot of ways." Saxon had been given his own bipolar diagnosis and detected in Ye some similar behaviors. Later, after they got to know each other a little, Saxon brought this up. "I'm, like, 'Are you on medication for it? I just started taking it a couple of months ago, and it fucking helped me.'"

Ye suggested that Saxon wear black and told him to be discreet: there were no permits for work on the house. Saxon's storytelling, like Ye's, can digress, and his experience on Malibu Road, which lasted about six weeks, is now the subject of his lawsuit, which centers on alleged underpayment and a back injury. But the outline of events is clear, and many of the details are confirmed by photographs and messages archived on Saxon's phone. Within a few days of that first meeting, Saxon had become something much closer to a project leader than to a day laborer. He helped assemble a small crew by enlisting people he knew and a few outside contractors who'd been working at the house when he showed up. Starting on the day he met Ye, Saxon didn't go home for several weeks. He found a mattress at the house; a friend later brought him some clothing in a trash bag, and his guitar. Saxon began taking the house apart.

A coffee-table survey of Ando's houses, to which Ando supplied a foreword, has the Sachs House on its cover. The photograph was taken at the top of the wide outdoor staircase. The photographer, facing the sea, was perhaps standing in the concrete hot tub. Below, on the house's main level, is the little courtyard. To the left, two cylindrical stainless-steel chimney pipes, serving an indoor fireplace, run up the side of the house, rising several feet above the upper terrace. The chimneys seem to quote a similar crowning gesture at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation.

Saxon's videos include one in which he's helping topple one of the chimneys. Another shows someone swinging a hammer at a bathroom's black-and-white marble walls. A third demonstrates how a handsome glass balustrade, the kind you're almost bound to find in a modern museum, shatters into windshield fragments when you tap its corner with a sledgehammer. In a fourth, Saxon and another man are demolishing the hot tub with two jackhammers. "There was so much rebar in the concrete," Saxon told me. "It was absolutely brutal."

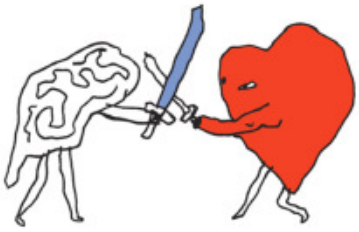
Saxon had been hired to carve an oceanside Turrell out of an angular fifty-seven-million-dollar Ando. Ye revealed to Saxon—although not all at once—that he wanted no kitchen, bathrooms, A.C., windows, light fixtures, or heating. He was intent on cutting off the water and the power (and removing the house's cable and wiring, which ran through the concrete in plastic tubes). He talked of clarity, simplicity, and a kind of self-reliance. "He wanted everything to be *his own doing*," Saxon told me. In one cheerful text from Ye to Saxon, in response to a report of the day's demolition, he wrote, "Let's gooooo . . . Simple fresh and cleeeeeean."

Saxon says that he negotiated a fee of twenty thousand dollars a week and agreed to disburse additional funds to pay colleagues and buy materials. Initially, he slept in a corner of the main floor, beneath where the Condo once hung. The glass on the staircase side was gone, but the big ocean-facing windows were still intact, and the weather was mild. The spot gave him a view of the front door. Saxon felt exposed to possible intruders. Once, he had to chase out a couple of young Ye fans, who appeared to be live-streaming.

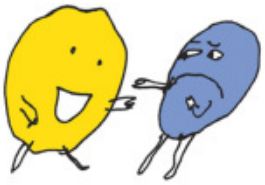
On Instagram, Saxon posted giddy, look-at-my-life content. In one such video, he sits on the wide indoor staircase, accompanying himself on the guitar in a resonant rendition of Smiley Lewis's 1955 hit, "I Hear You Knocking." A caption reads, "Acoustics are too good at my new friend's house." Another video is captioned, "I take rich people showers now." His impulse to amass half-ironic selfies, taken against a preposterous backdrop of ocean and concrete, is understandable, and it's one that he shared with the occupants of the Big Ando nearby. (Maria Bell, posting on Instagram around the same time: "Another album cover . . . My solo is entitled 'Girl Brush your Hair.'")

At first, Saxon saw a fair amount of Ye. One morning, before dawn, Ye drove Saxon and another worker to Home Depot, and then to McDonald's, in a Lamborghini S.U.V. Some hours later, Ye announced that he was offended by how Saxon looked and smelled after a long day of labor, and took him to the Nobu hotel, in Malibu, where he had a room. He gave Saxon some clothes and ran a bath for him. "My jaw is, like, on the floor," Saxon recalled. "He's drawing the water. He goes, 'You will never forget this moment.' I said, 'Damn

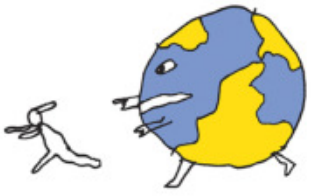
EPIC BATTLES


BRAIN VS. HEART

X VS. O

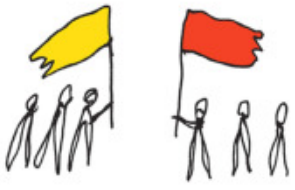

YES VS. NO

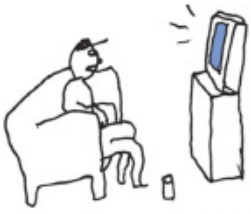
THIS VS. THAT


SELF VS. WORLD

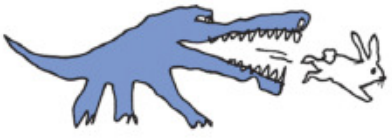
YOU VS. ME

ME VS. I

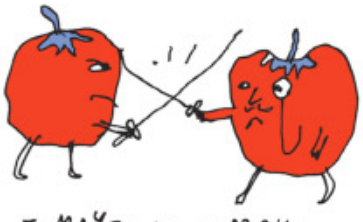

US VS. THEM


THEM VS. THEM

ITS VS. IT'S


SHOULD VS. WANT TO

GOOD VS. EVIL


TOMAYTO VS. TOMAHTO

KNOWN VS. UNKNOWN

DOG VS. CAT

KETCHUP VS. MUSTARD

STEINBERG VS. STEIG

KID VS. ADULT

BUSINESS VS. PLEASURE

BUY VS. RENT

LFINCK

right I will not.' We were cracking up."

On another day, Kardashian visited Malibu Road, with some of the children, or perhaps all four—Saxon isn't sure. He recalled helping the kids find foam blocks, from the ramp project, to play with. He also said that one of his colleagues, arriving at the house, glanced at Kardashian and said, distractedly, "Oh, hello, Bianca." (There is a resemblance.) After the family had left, Ye put his forehead on Saxon's shoulder and groaned, "*Why would your boy say that?* She's the most famous woman on earth!" Saxon, apologizing, said of his friend, "He's old." (A few weeks later, Kardashian hosted "Saturday Night Live," which led to a relationship with the cast member Pete Davidson. Ye later threatened Davidson with violence.)

Over the next weeks, even as Saxon's experience rewarded him with moments of exhilaration, as well as a considerable income, his sense that he could handle anything was increasingly tested. Before long, there was no kitchen in the house and nowhere else to keep food. Dust got into everything. Saxon and his colleagues knocked out all five bathrooms. Nighttime temperatures dropped. He had to placate the neighbors, who, he was relieved to learn, were rarely at home during the week, and he tried to remain invisible to city authorities: he couldn't have a dumpster out front, and when the bathrooms were gone he had to hide a porta-potty. As Censori once patiently explained to Ye, in a group text where he'd shown impatience, "No permitting increases caution." Saxon told me, "I was functioning like the sick-raccoon rock-and-roller that I am—just living off of Ensure and Red Bull." (He contends that Ye insisted he stay at the house; others say that it was his choice.) Saxon felt trapped by his night-watchman role and slept poorly. A big wave would crash, he recalled, "and I'd think somebody was breaking into the house." A seagull pecked at him. He recalled once waking to Ye standing over him and saying, "I thought you'd be working."

By the end of October, demolition was largely complete. The process had been interrupted by only occasional moments of confusion. Once, Saxon thought that he was following Ye's instructions by smashing up the fire pit in the courtyard. He sent Ye a photograph of the pit reduced to a circular stump. "This is not a good job brother," Ye texted. He'd wanted Saxon to take out the living-room fireplace instead. It hardly mattered: all of it had to go.

The project was now starting to focus on additions and enhancements. Saxon found this phase more fraught; it required engineering—and some planning. What did Ye want? Writing to Censori, Saxon observed how odd it was that, "no matter how tight we are with Ye," they remained unsure of his intentions. He added, "It's always an adventure." Censori replied, "LMAOOO I know isn't it crazy." Saxon developed a solidarity with Censori born of these conditions. He encouraged Ye to have her take on a larger role at Malibu Road; in turn, she helped Saxon compose texts to Ye, who had complained of verbiage. ("I don't read long text," he texted.) Saxon and Censori once had a jokey exchange about marrying, to allow her to stay in the U.S. legally. Censori: "I'll get the best wedding dress." She added a bride emoji. Saxon: "Fine but we need to have an Elvis impersonator." Censori: "Obviously!!!!"

Ye could become distracted. On the visit to Home Depot to buy tools, he'd spent an age trying to learn who had lined up plant pots in an appealing way. A sales assistant shrugged. "Well, I *want their number*," Ye said, according to Saxon. "That's how I want my plants to look." (They didn't buy any tools.) While the Sachs House was being transformed, Ye was busy: making post-release changes to "Donda"; running a fashion empire; preparing to open a private school, the Donda Academy, west of L.A.; and reviving his Sunday Service concerts, built around a gospel choir, which he'd begun a few years earlier. On October 28th, the Friday before the first of these concerts, which was to be held at a downtown warehouse that had been rented for Ye's Gap business, Censori texted Saxon, "Wowwww so I'm on a 17 hour car ride from Portugal to Paris with Ye." (Ye has said that he couldn't fly directly to Paris that week because he'd received only one COVID vaccination shot.) The road trip was "slightly torture," she said, but she was grateful to have been included. She asked Saxon whether he knew anyone who could procure a "giant sphere." A new text: "By Sunday." She meant for the L.A. concert. She then sent a pho-

"Finally! Here's the funny video I mentioned thirty minutes ago that the conversation has long since moved on from."

tograph of "Unseen Seen," by James Turrell, installed in a museum in Tasmania. It's a sphere that accommodates two people at a time: after signing a waiver, they lie on their backs and are bombarded by colored light. That weekend's Sunday Service—attended by, among others, Marilyn Manson, Justin Bieber, and Tony Saxon—appears to have been held without a sphere.

A few weeks earlier, Saxon had shown Ye a part of the Malibu Road house that he'd never seen before. In the garage, Saxon opened a hatch in the floor, then led Ye down a ladder into a space that, although on the same level as the laundry and the lower-floor bedrooms, couldn't be accessed from there, and was basement-like in its lack of natural light. As Saxon recalled it, he explained to Ye, "Look, there's your water purifier. There's your A.C. systems, there's your boiler, there's your water softener. You know, this is the guts of the house." Ye, looking around, replied, "This is going to be my bomb shelter. This is going to be my Batcave."

Ye's hopes for the house, at least at this moment, call to mind the Atlanta stadium setup. There'd be a cell-like capsule to provide for some basic human needs, from which one could emerge into a big, semipublic space that was open to the sky. This was a vision less of a home than of a refuge within a striking concrete art work. One of the people on the project had discussions with disaster-proofing specialists. Ye sent Saxon various drawings showing an arrangement of amenities within a small space. One image contained spherical and ovoid objects—"cooker," "pump," "fridge"—but no mattress. Another included three crates, a "flat pack shower," and a "robot platform." Ye wrote, "Let's make this in real life." Saxon texted, "I love this—it's genius," but he had no idea what he was meant to do. There were similarly desultory exchanges about recycling rainwater and cutting a hole in the floor to make a toilet.

Ye remained adamant about disconnecting the house from the grid; he also opposed installing solar panels. In Saxon's view, it would be unpleasant (and loudly indiscreet) to operate tools like concrete mixers using gas or diesel generators. Ye was unsympathetic. His usual boosterish tone—"What's up, brother? Good morning. I love you. Let's get this shit done," in Saxon's summary—gave way to peevishness: "Why is there still power here?"

By the start of November, no work had begun on the ramps, or slides, that had always been a part of Ye's conception. Although Ye had been open to the idea that paint could blur the difference between concrete and wood, Saxon recalled him recognizing that the foam had looked shoddy on the stairs. Saxon had then asked an acquaintance to design a ramp scheme. A rendering, which Saxon forwarded to Ye, featured new walls and a slide made of stainless steel, like in a playground. Ye didn't like it. On November 5th, Censori sent, in a chat, three renderings of a concrete ramp with Ando-style tie holes. Ye, in another chat, wrote, "When will this be done? I've been asking for this for over a month."

He had bought a house designed by an architect with a history of staircase panache. The Big Ando has a dazzling, thirty-six-foot-wide outdoor staircase on which you could reënact "Battleship Potemkin." But, in 2023, a lawsuit brought by former teachers at the Donda Academy, which shut down soon after it opened, claimed that Ye had discouraged the use of the second floor—because he was "afraid of stairs." That may not be true, but he certainly had no regard for stairs. On what may be the only occasion when Ye has publicly mentioned events at Malibu Road, he told a pair of podcasters that he was "really big on outlawing stairs," adding, "Everything should be designed like an old folks' home."

The ramps that Ye proposed for Malibu Road appeared to be at least four times as steep as any allowed by the Americans with Disabilities Act, and they would have ended not far from the edge of a terrace that, during the demolition process, lost its balustrade. Someone descending the ramp from the primary bedroom on, say, a skateboard, could expect to shoot off the edge and land some thirty feet below, on the beach.

Another rendering, sent along with the concrete-ramp images, showed a room turned into an unambiguously Turrell-like space, with a large hole cut into its ceiling. By this point, Saxon was feeling unwell and unhappy: he says that his payments had stopped arriving and that his co-workers were maneuvering to sideline him. It seems possible that Ye had come to recognize that Saxon, for all his virtues, was unqualified to run an ill-defined project in experimental engineering. On November 5th, Saxon shared with Ye a link to a 1958 recording of "When I've Done My Best," by the Harmonizing Four. Not long after, Saxon drove to meet Ye at the Gap building downtown. (Ye would later be sued for changes he'd allegedly made to this rental: according to the suit, bathrooms had been removed, and a ramp and a tunnel added.) Ye and Saxon had a fight—about money, electricity, and Saxon's apparent reluctance to take out the ocean-facing windows in the living room. In Saxon's memory, Ye said, "If you don't do what I asked you to do, I'm not going to be your friend anymore. You're not going to work for me anymore. And you're only going to see me on TV." Saxon told Ye that he didn't watch TV. "And then I walked the fuck out."

When Ye's fifth studio album, "My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy," was released, in 2010, it was almost universally received as a masterpiece. A few years later, Ye gave an interview to BBC Radio 1. " 'Dark Fantasy' could be considered to be perfect," he said. "I know how to make perfect, but that's not what I'm here to do. I'm here to crack the pavement and make new grounds sonically and in society—culturally."

If Ye's decision-making on Malibu Road shows evidence of incomplete thinking about, among other things, certificates of occupancy, toilets, and the challenge of being a global celebrity in a windowless house on a public beach, it also doesn't look like a project of heedless destruction. One can allow that not every aesthetic rebellion yields art of value, and also recognize that a jackass is sometimes just a jackass—to borrow President Obama's appraisal of Ye—and not an iconoclast. But Malibu Road was at least an attempt at radical design. In 2021, Ye had a core architectural team

"Oh, I don't want to fix the fact that I use everyone around me. I'm here to complain about the service."

• •

of three people—Censori, Tanil Raif, and Abe Salman—all of whom were still in their twenties. Ye spent much of his time with them, travelled with them, and talked with them about developing an architecture of "primitive futurism" or "neo-primitivism." He was a student among recent students. Ye's circumstances were, of course, weird: other architectural apprentices experiment with 3-D-modelling software; he did his experimenting on a three-story Ando. Yet his public remarks, as well as his actions, have the strengths, and weaknesses, of a spirited young designer. "I'm very into architecture, but I'm not into the class system," Ye said in 2021. Housing, he observed, was just another form of control; the idea of being "homeless on purpose" interested him. Speaking to the podcasters in 2022, Ye said that he'd wanted to "look at the bones" of the Sachs House—to strip away "compromises" that he supposed had been forced on Ando by his client. "To get this house, and be able to just take everything out—it was, you know, extremely therapeutic." He once told Saxon, "Ando would love this. I can't wait to show him everything we did. He would *love* this." (A representative of Ando's recently told me that Ando "does not like to talk much about the House in Malibu" and declined further comment.)

A few months after Saxon left, Ye met with Kulapat Yantrasast, the former Ando architect, and took him to Malibu Road. Work had continued for a while after Saxon left—Ye persuaded someone to remove the big windows—but then everything had stopped. (The City of Malibu recently acknowledged that, on December 21st, it issued the first of three stop-work orders on the house, because construction had been done without permits.)

Yantrasast approved of what he saw. Or, at least, he didn't mourn what had been lost. "The classics cannot stay stable for too long—they become complacent," he told me. Ye soon became a client of Yantrasast's. In the following months, they talked of other projects, and Ye expressed interest in buying the Big Ando. Yantrasast and Ye returned to Malibu Road several times. "He wanted to understand how this concrete structure could be enhanced," Yantrasast said. "Not brought back to how it was, but become completely different, in a way that was very raw."

He went on, "I have to say, I really admire what Ye was trying to do." As Yantrasast saw it, Ye had used Ando "as a base to build his own language of architecture." Inside the Hidden Hills house, Ye had worked to "reduce and reduce and reduce," and had then understood "that the next step is to really go to the primal rawness." Yantrasast said that he'd been reminded of the end of Robert Altman's film "Prêt-à-Porter," when a fashion designer sends naked models out on the runway.

Toward the end of 2022, Ye made the antisemitic and pro-Nazi remarks that destroyed his business empire. Adidas dropped him, describing his comments as "unacceptable, hateful and dangerous." (Ye eventually released a general statement of apology, in Hebrew.) According to estimates made by *Forbes*, his net worth fell from two billion dollars to four hundred million. He could no longer afford the Big Ando.

In December, 2022, Ye posted on Instagram a song called "Censori Overload." (It included a sample from an interview he'd just given to Alex Jones, of Infowars, in which he'd praised Hitler.) The next month, Ye and Censori were photographed out together, as an apparent couple. It was later reported that they had already married. Censori has since become known to tabloids in part for a wardrobe whose near-nude minimalism also brings to mind Altman's concluding scene. Last year, she and Ye were seen with Turrell, waiting for valet parking outside a lobster restaurant in Santa Monica. They were also photographed at Ando's Chichu Art Museum, on Naoshima.

In May, 2023, the Bells sold the Big Ando to Beyoncé and Jay-Z, for a hundred and ninety million dollars—the most ever paid for a house in California. A Ye-oriented Reddit thread introduced that news by quoting from "Big Brother," Ye's 2007 track about the mixture of rivalry and respect in his rela-

tionship with Jay-Z: "I told Jay I did a song with Coldplay / Next thing I know he got a song with Coldplay."

Architectural fame doesn't guarantee respect. Americans have demolished houses by Frank Lloyd Wright and Marcel Breuer. Last year, Chris Pratt, the actor, and his wife, Katherine Schwarzenegger, a self-help writer, bought a house in the Brentwood area of Los Angeles designed by Craig Ellwood, an admired mid-century architect. They knocked it down and began building something five times as large. In the nineties, a Pacific Palisades house designed by Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen—working together, as part of the now celebrated mid-century Case Study experiment in residential architecture—was sold to a man who built a mansion inches from its face. The Case Study house lost its wide view of the ocean, becoming an annex joined to its blocky new neighbor by a corridor.

It's hard, however, to think of another esteemed house that's been left exposed to the elements, and to the public's gaze, after being jackhammered halfway to ruins. Saxon told me, "It's funny—and not funny, in a way—to say, 'I'm the man who single-handedly destroyed this architectural masterpiece.' But I pretty much did."

Ron Radziner recalled the first time he saw photographs of the changes made to the Sachs House. "We were all devastated," he said. "It was this *beautiful* piece of architecture, and it's really destroyed." Toward the end of last year, he heard again from Ye's office. In Radziner's recollection, he was asked "to put it all back together." He expressed interest. He told me, "I'd be thrilled to have the opportunity to bring it all the way back."

Radziner gave Ye an estimate. (He declined to share the figure with me, beyond acknowledging that it exceeded ten million dollars.) As before, Ye didn't reply. "The next thing we heard is the house was on the market."

In December, the news broke that the Malibu Road house was being listed by the Oppenheim Group, which is both a real-estate brokerage and the setting of the hit reality show "Selling Sunset," on Netflix. The Oppenheim Group listing used the same photographs that Sachs had used when selling it: balustrades, sun loungers, windows. Ye's asking price was fifty-three million dollars.

In February, I spoke to Jason Oppenheim, who runs the company with his twin brother, Brett. Jason gamely tried to close the gap between that imagery and the cavernous reality. Stress-testing real-estate rhetoric, he argued that an Ando structure is "ninety per cent concrete" and that what has been lost on Malibu Road is "just, really, finish work," which was already a decade old and ripe for replacement. "So you're going to be getting, essentially, a *brand-new* Ando."

As he noted, Ando is in his eighties, and one can't just call him up to ask for a design. The house was a "collectible"—all the more so because of the Ye connection. A buyer would be inheriting from two cultural giants. "I don't know if there's a more interesting story behind a house," Oppenheim said. "It's exciting that you get to be the third iteration. You're following Ando and West, and then you're getting to put your stamp on it."

Oppenheim conceded that it's hard to think of plumbing, power, and windows as "finish." There were plans, he said, to do some work on the house if it didn't sell quickly. "I do think that windows and doors will allow it to be received better," he said. He estimated that a full renovation, making the house habitable, might take eighteen to twenty-four months and cost "plus-or-minus five million." (He later said that it was definitely plus.) When I asked Oppenheim about the stainless-steel chimneys, whose demolition had altered the silhouette of the house, he seemed surprised: "I don't recall any chimney being removed."

It was a sluggish time in the "ultra-lux" market, Oppenheim said. He did not rule out the idea that Ye's torn-up house might appear on "Selling Sunset."

A few days later, I walked along the beach in Malibu. It was around high tide, when you're forced to pass right by the pillars that support the houses looming over you; you're close enough to read sour, threatening little signs urging you to go away. Waves occasionally reached beneath Ye's house. On a narrow staircase that leads down to the sand, the bottom six or seven steps were wet.

Up on Malibu Road, it looked as though someone had attempted to force open the freestanding concrete mailbox in front of the house, near where Saxon had once tried to hide a porta-potty. But the street-facing side of the house was otherwise in unaltered condition and delivered the usual Ando contrast of high precision—holes and lines—and the subtle disorder of the concrete's shading, with bruises of dark gray, or yellowish gray, set against paler gray.

Inside, I was surprised by the loudness of the surf—even in the dim vestibule where the aluminum Ando statue used to stand. In an empty house with no windows, the sound of the ocean filled every room. Underfoot, the original tiles had been hammered out, and so had the cables and pipes that were once embedded beneath. The floor was now rough concrete, covered in cavities and trenches, like a road that had been chewed up by a milling machine ahead of a resurfacing.

I looked around for half an hour. The seagulls kept their distance. The sun shone. Oppenheim was not quite wrong: the house was still here, in a way that another architect's work might not be, given Ye's thoroughness and more than two years of salt and rain. But the fireplace was now a hole between the living room and the courtyard; the concrete hot tub was just a scar. The staircases were as pitted as the floors. It was a scene of violence, even if you could still identify the spot where Sachs once hung a Cindy Sherman. The walls often showed where someone had aimed a blow at a closet or a sheet of marble but instead hit smooth concrete, contributing a rogue mark to Ando's tie-hole pattern. At some point, on the beach side of the house, where there were once windows and glass balustrades, safety barriers were installed. They quickly rusted, and the concrete beneath them was stained red.

Downstairs, an internal concrete wall, which once stood between a bedroom and its bathroom, lay on the floor in fragments, with rebar poking out of it—I saw this against a backdrop of perfectly blue sky, suggesting an Anselm Kiefer sculpture on vacation. I walked through the former laundry into the control room. Almost no daylight reached this corner, and there was no cross-breeze to dry it out. I was splashing through an inch or two of standing water that looked gray in the dim light. Ye's Batcave was on the other side of the wall in front of me.

In mid-April, he reduced the price to thirty-nine million dollars. ♦

The school in Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom, a village of Palestinian and Jewish families, is fully bilingual, with equal hours of

instruction in Arabic and Hebrew.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY OFIR BERMAN

LETTER FROM ISRAEL

A SEMBLANCE OF PEACE

How life in a co-living community changed after October 7th.

BY MASHA GESSEN

Amir's house, in Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom, an intentional community of Jewish Israeli and Palestinian Israeli families, is made of stone, chic but spare, not showy. A covered porch faces west, looking out at the green expanse of the Ayalon Valley. Amir, who is Palestinian, first moved to Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom thirty-five years ago, when he was four. His family had been living in East Jerusalem and wanted to escape the violence of the first intifada. The village school, which goes from nursery through sixth grade, is fully bilingual, with equal hours of instruction in Arabic and Hebrew. When Amir speaks Hebrew, Jewish Israelis have a hard time believing that he is Arab, and they often say so, thinking it's a compliment.

Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom—which means Oasis of Peace, in Arabic and Hebrew—was founded by Bruno Hussar, an Egyptian-born Jew who fled the Nazi invasion of France and later became a Dominican priest. Around 1970, he secured a large parcel of land, on loan from a Trappist monastery, to attempt an experiment in nonmilitarism and religious pluralism in the middle of Israel, halfway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. This was the age of encounter groups, gatherings based on a belief in the total power of dialogue, and Hussar envisioned Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom as a permanent encounter. By the time Amir's family arrived, the community had widened its efforts by establishing the School for Peace, a training center for activists, academics, and civil servants. Some eighty thousand people have completed the School for Peace's courses, which aim to turn citizens of Israel, both Palestinian and Jewish, into agents of change.

Amir left the village at nineteen and later became a successful businessman in Tel Aviv. His wife, who is Jewish, grew up in one of the city's suburbs. Three years ago, after she became pregnant with their first child, Amir moved his family back to Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom. He couldn't imagine raising half-Jewish, half-Palestinian children anywhere else. Now, as we talked on his porch one evening in April, he was thinking of moving to Cyprus. "I'm a Palestinian," he said. "I love this land. But I'm a human being who has only so many years to live." (Amir is not his real name; he asked to use an alias, because "we have right-wing organizations here looking for mixed couples.")

The sun set fast, plunging the valley into darkness. In the first weeks of the war, Amir told me, you could watch the rockets from Gaza flying in the distance and exploding in the air, like fireworks, as they were intercepted by the Israeli air-defense system. You could also feel the earth rumble as Israeli bombs detonated in Gaza. When Amir thought about the people of Gaza, where an estimated thirty-five thousand have been killed and another 1.7 million displaced, he imagined "how far they are from being able to feel any kind of forgiveness for this country. And I live in this country."

His wife was pregnant with their second child. Amir said, "My children will be safe in Wahat al-Salam until the sixth grade." At that point, they would be ushered into Israel's segregated education system—where the Hebrew-language schools are among the best in the world, and the Arabic-language schools among the worst. After another six years, some of his kids' Jewish friends would join the Israeli military, just as most of Amir's Jewish friends from Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom did. "The thing that hurts me the most is the fact that people here serve in the Army," he said. "I believe that no one here would hurt a Palestinian. But I believe that as a human being you should not be complicit."

Six months after the Hamas attack on October 7th, I went to Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom to see what the war

had done to the village and, more broadly, to the Israeli peace movement. Amir told me that a gap had opened between the Palestinian residents of the community and some of their Jewish neighbors. The Jews wanted the Palestinians to denounce Hamas and its murders. The Palestinians felt that some Jews were indifferent to the devastation of Gaza. The cognitive distance wasn't unfamiliar to Amir: he experienced it with his in-laws and with other Israeli Jews. He had never thought that he would experience it in Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom.

His phone buzzed. Neighbors were asking when we were going to show up at the village's iftar dinner, a festive meal that ends the daylong fasts of Ramadan. Amir was responsible for bringing beverages. We got into his white S.U.V. The houses on our left, clinging to the hillside below the road, were invisible in the dark. By the time we arrived at the event, which was held in the Pluralistic Spiritual Center, a triple-domed stone structure, most of the food was gone. Children were running around; adults had broken up into small groups; stragglers were scrounging for shreds of grilled chicken and cabbage salad.

In the front garden, I sat down on a bench with Michal Zak, Bob Mark, and their daughter Neriya, who were all Jewish. "We've been here forty years," Mark said. "Not a lot of things can surprise us." But the tensions that had formed within the community since October 7th were unfamiliar. Early on, the village held several community-wide meetings; the Palestinian residents barely spoke. "There was this very loud silence," Neriya, who is thirty-six, said. Elsewhere in Israel, Palestinian citizens have faced arrests, firings, and mob violence for expressing solidarity with the people of Gaza. But for Palestinians in the village, Zak, who conducts training at the School for Peace, said, "it's not the fear of the police—it's the fear of hearing the reactions of people being not as compassionate as you want them to be. It's realizing who your partners are."

Neriya helped form a four-person group to figure out what a village based on a belief in dialogue could do when half of its residents had been rendered speechless. She and the others eventually decided to hold bereavement circles—not discussion groups but grief groups, in which people who had suffered loss would be asked to speak. The group spent a week devising the wording for the announcement. One suggestion was "We grieve for the murdered and the killed," in which the murdered were victims of Hamas and the killed were Gazans. They argued about the different connotations of agency in "murdered" and "killed," finally settling on wording that skirted the issue—"grieving for the war victims."

A Palestinian doctor described losing several close colleagues in the Hamas attack. Other Palestinians spoke about loved ones who had been killed in Gaza, and about Gaza itself—about the summers they'd spent there as children, about the physical environment they'd known so intimately, now gone. "It came up again and again," Mark said. "This hellhole. And they have such warm memories of it." A Palestinian resident who works for a large Israeli company talked about a Palestinian colleague who had lost close members of her family in Gaza and, contrary to common practice, received no acknowledgment from her employer. "Who ever heard of a person demanding condolences?" Mark asked.

"She wants to be seen," Zak said.

According to different accounts, Hussar started Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom in either a camper van or a shipping container. His early companions were two Catholic women and a shifting cast of young Europeans. It took more than a decade to assemble the initial core of the village, with an equal number of Jewish and Arab families. These early residents had seen their contemporaries killed in the Yom Kippur War, in 1973, when Israel fought a coalition of Arab states led by Egypt. Within a few years, Egypt and Israel had negotiated a peace settlement, with Egypt ultimately becoming the first Arab state to recognize Israel and with Israel withdrawing its troops from the Sinai Peninsula. To this generation of Israelis, there was no entrenched status quo: borders were shifting—the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza was never supposed to be indefinite—and the only constant, it seemed, was war. Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom's mission was to overturn this assumption by building a miniature model of a future in which Arabs and Jews share a land and govern it jointly—co-living, not just coexistence.

Eldad Joffe, the current mayor, first heard about the community when he was a student at Hebrew University, in Jerusalem, in the late nineteen-seventies. The village was little more than a barren hilltop. After university, he and his wife, Imi, lived in the United States. They returned to Israel in 1994, the year of peak hope. Yitzhak Rabin, the Prime Minister, from the Labor Party, shared the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in the Oslo accords, which appeared to offer a road map for ending the Israeli occupation and creating a Palestinian state. A year later, Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing Jewish extremist, a member of what was then a radical fringe opposed to the peace process. In 2000, the Joffes attended a meditation retreat in Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom and left wanting to raise their children there. The village had continued to grow, building event spaces and a small hotel. By the time the Joffes were accepted into Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom, bought a plot, commissioned a design, built the house, and moved in, their three kids were adults, and the right-wing extremists were running the country.

One of Joffe's children, a daughter, moved to Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom with her partner—at the time, they were the only openly lesbian couple in the village—and now she works with an after-school program. A son moved to Houston, Texas, with his family. As Joffe neared retirement—he had become an administrator at Hebrew University—he imagined himself spending most of his time with his grandchildren in the U.S. Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom, he felt, was losing its spirit. Young people, many of them natives of the village who were moving back, seemed to have little use for the hard work of dialogue-building. They wanted to raise their families "in this coexistence," he said, but not continue to nurture it. At the same time, the community was expanding: about forty new houses were planned for construction, which would take the total up

to more than a hundred and twenty. Joffe decided to run for mayor on a platform of restoring Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom to its idealistic roots. His first day on the job was supposed to be October 8, 2023. He started a day early.

Joffe quickly convened a meeting of the village council to handle practical issues: they closed the gate at the village entrance, reviewed plans for sheltering in case of shelling, and assessed resources for emergency water and power supplies. State authorities were issuing assault rifles to civilians in communities across the country. In Israel, gun possession is largely restricted to people who have served in the military. Jews, with the exception of the ultra-Orthodox, are subject to mandatory military service, as are the Druze and Circassian minorities. A number of Jews from the village have refused to serve; others—some say half, some say more—have accepted being drafted. Palestinian citizens of Israel, if they wish to serve, must volunteer. As far as anyone knows, none of the Palestinians living in Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom have served in the Israel Defense Forces. This meant that, if there were going to be guns in the village, they would be in the hands only of Jews. Living side by side with armed Jews was precisely what the Palestinian residents had come to the village to avoid. Nevertheless, the state sent six guns to Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom.

The village's system of self-governance can be slow. Questions of community life—about employment practices or the approval of new construction—are resolved in community-wide meetings. The process is designed to build a working model of coöperation, case by case, idea by idea, not to handle existential emergencies. The gate stayed closed for six weeks. It took a few months for the village to decide to return the guns.

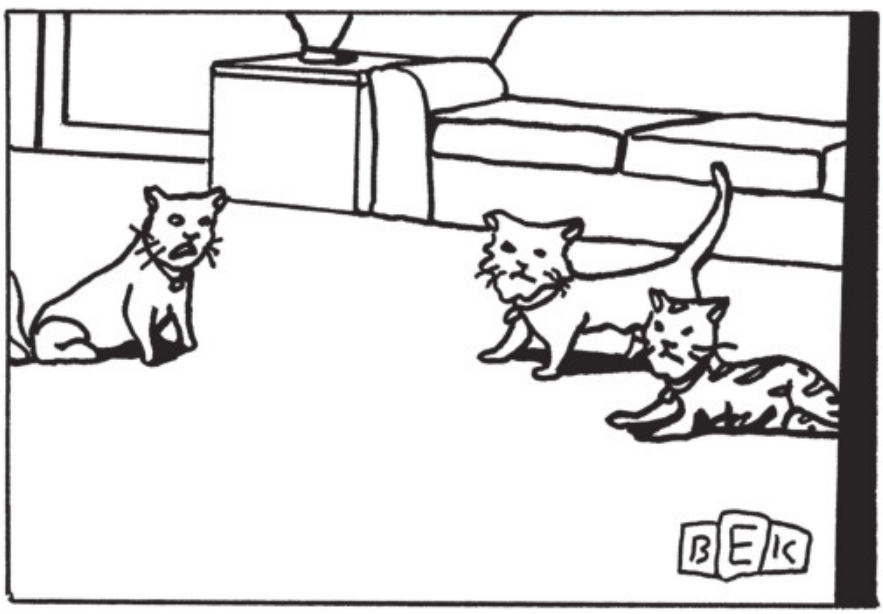
Israeli lefties often observe that war is a terrible time to be a peace activist. It's also a terrible time to be the mayor of a peacenik village. Joffe, who wanted to work on creating dialogue and building a better future, has instead become a specialist in preparing for the worst. In March, the head of the regional council, which governs fifty-seven villages, convened a meeting to discuss, among other things, a looming war with Hezbollah. "It wasn't whether but *when*," Joffe told me. A war with Hezbollah, which is far better equipped than Hamas, could have a much greater impact on the center of the country than the war in Gaza. Village leaders were told to make preparations for days without water, electricity, or communications. "The whole evening was dedicated to this," Joffe added. "And not a single person said that maybe we should try to prevent this."

We were talking in Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom's café, a shaded courtyard with half a dozen tables. The proprietor, Rayek Rizek, sat nearby, working on his laptop. He and his wife, Dyana, who are both Palestinian, moved to the village almost forty years ago. In the late nineties and early two-thousands, Rayek served two terms as mayor. These days, he is more withdrawn. He didn't attend the community meetings after October 7th, he said, "because I don't want to get involved in such discussions about who is the victim. I know that you can't teach anyone anything." Dyana, who runs an art gallery in Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom, did go to the meetings. It wasn't easy, she said. "Some Jews, they blamed us, as Palestinians."

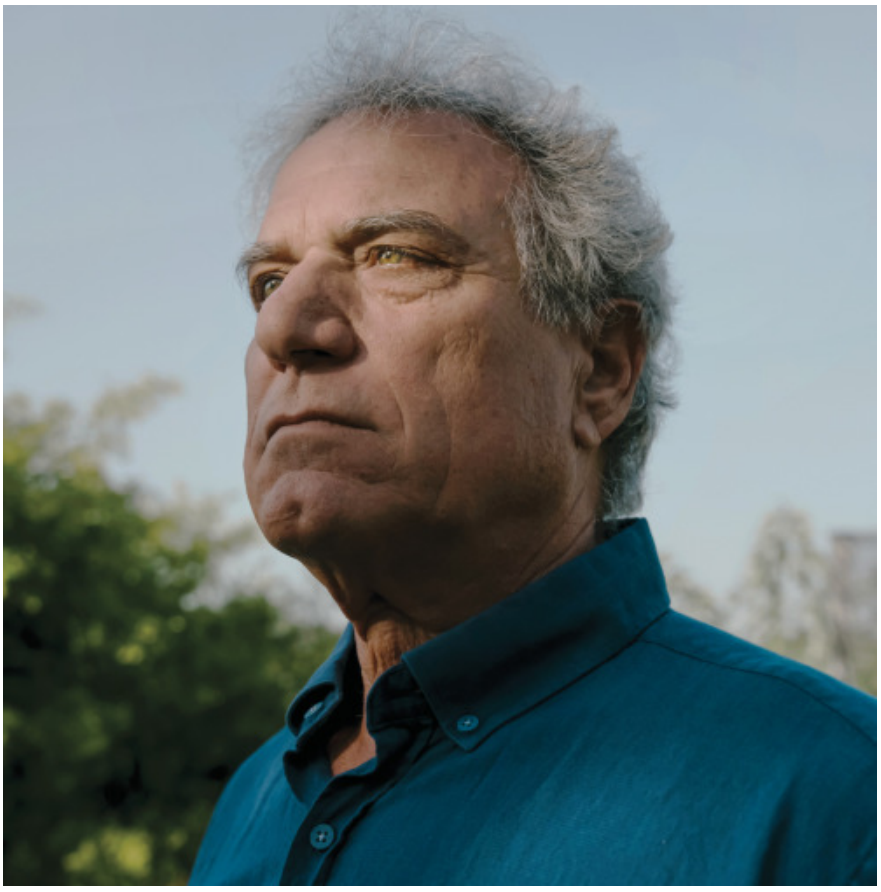
I first visited Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom about six years ago, while working on a book about imaginative political projects. At the time, everyone in the village knew what everyone else was up to; everything, it seemed, was discussed in a village WhatsApp group chat. By the spring of 2024, this was no longer the case. Neriya Mark told me about a Palestinian resident who, a month into the war, had lost forty members of her family in Gaza, but never shared her grief in the WhatsApp chat. At the other extreme, the Jews of Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom who had reported for military duty weren't sharing their decision in the WhatsApp chat, either. "There was a rumor that some people in the village did volunteer back in October," Samah Salaime, a Palestinian who is the co-director of education institutions in Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom, told me. "This was the spirit in the country."

Everyone wanted to do something after October 7th. For Jews, volunteering to fight was the most obvious course of action. But what could Palestinian citizens of Israel do? Dyana Rizek, the gallerist, used to start her day with yoga and meditation. Now, when she wakes up, she checks her phone to see if her friends in Gaza are still alive. Then she reads the news on Telegram and watches Al Jazeera. Before helping her husband open the café, she works on raising money for friends and family in the West Bank, where unemployment skyrocketed after Israel effectively put a halt to the movement of workers.

The gallery has been shuttered since October 7th. Rizek had tried to assemble



"Let's try not to turn this into some depressing Bravo reunion show where one of us goes crazy."



Eldad Joffe, the mayor since October 7th, has lived in the village for twenty years.

a show that would address the war, but, although she had been curating joint Palestinian-Jewish shows for nearly a decade, she couldn't find enough artists willing to share wall space "with the other side." So she decided to ask residents of Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom to express their feelings through art. She is still working on gathering pieces for the show. In the meantime, she has changed its name five times, from "My Existence" to "Receiving Our Humanity" to "Our Humanity Demands Action" to "Are We Together or Not" to "Art in a Time of War and Destruction, for the Future" to, for now, "Where To?" One of the goals of the show is to break through the silence that has descended on the village. "Palestinians who live in Israel have started to feel since October 7th that we live under military rule," Rizek said. "We are afraid to express ourselves, even if we live in Wahat al-Salam."

Palestinian activists elsewhere, especially in the occupied territories, have long been skeptical of Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom. Even before October 7th, some activists in Ramallah considered the village a "shoot-and-cry" project, an endeavor that accomplished little more than helping Israeli Jews feel better about themselves. Vivien Sansour, a Palestinian activist from Bethlehem, told me that she was all for political imagination, but that "there is a difference between imagination and pretending." A co-living community nestled inside a country that had made the occupation a cornerstone of its politics was, to her, nothing but a fantasy.

Samah Salaime, the co-director of educational institutions, is a prominent Palestinian feminist activist and writer. She writes a regular column for *+972*, a magazine edited by Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel (+972 is Israel's telephone country code). In November, Salaime wrote a tribute to her friend Vivian Silver, a Canadian Israeli peace activist who was killed on October 7th. "I lost Vivian," Salaime told me. "I can't ignore my grief." A few weeks later, she published a column in support of the victims of sexual violence perpetrated by Hamas. Some Palestinian activists have criticized her for bringing attention to the rape allegations. "I can't ignore the Jewish women who paid a high price," she told me. "I can't not think about the mothers with children who are now in Gaza. Those who are underground and those who are dying on the ground. If I were a woman in Lebanon, in Ramallah, I might not see this complexity."

Salaime, who is forty-eight, grew up in the north of Israel, a few miles from her family's ancestral village. Their former home, which they had been forced to flee in 1948, no longer existed, but the family's olive grove did; its new owners were Jewish. After attending Arabic-language school, Salaime gained entry to Hebrew University. Her Hebrew was good but antiquated, the language of literature rather than of the street—ordering a pizza was an exercise in humiliation. More important, Salaime encountered an entirely different view of her native land, the Jewish Israeli narrative, which contradicted everything that her family had taught her. She wanted her children to grow up knowing both stories. When the oldest of Salaime's three sons was ready to start elementary school, in 2000, she recalled hearing about a village, a half hour's drive from Jerusalem, where Jewish and Arab kids went to class together and were taught by Arabic- and Hebrew-speaking teachers. After visiting the school in Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom, Salaime told her husband, "We are not just putting our kids in this school—we are moving to the village."

I first interviewed Salaime in 2018. She told me then that her sons had best friends who were Jewish, at least one of whom was expected to serve in the military. Salaime had confronted her son about continuing to be friends with a person who was about to put on an I.D.F. uniform. He had reassured her that the friend wouldn't serve in combat and wouldn't be posted to the occupied territories. Salaime was unconvinced. "You brought me here to this village, you raised me alongside Jews, you taught me to trust them," she recalled him saying. "Now you are going to have to trust me when I say I trust him."

One of her sons is now a college student in Haifa, Israel's northernmost city. In the weeks after October 7th, life was suspended across the country. Salaime's son had no classes, and the restaurant where he worked was closed. When it reopened, Jewish staff members were invited back, but her son wasn't. (Salaime called to intervene, and he was eventu-

ally reinstated.) Classes started in person again, and many of his Jewish classmates arrived with guns. At the same time, Salaime's youngest son resumed commuting to a high school in Jerusalem. "When he is coming back on the bus late at night, I can't talk to him on the phone, because the bus is full of people with guns," she said. "If they hear a young man speaking Arabic . . ." She paused. If they stick to texting, she said, her son can pass for a Jew.

In some ways, Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom had remained a sanctuary. At a community meeting following October 7th, when some of the Jewish residents demanded that their Palestinian neighbors speak out against the attack, Salaime was able to push back. "I said it was really offensive to ask me to condemn," she told me. "You know me for twenty-three years. It's obvious." She ultimately gained a lot from the meetings. "People on the Jewish side who still believe in equality are under attack," she said. "They became like me, isolated. I learned that they need me. And I need them. They can be my voice. The Palestinian side needs the Jewish voice."

Eight years ago, Jonathan Dekel, a Jewish filmmaker, moved with his wife and three kids to Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom. He had done five years of military service in a combat unit, though he never saw combat. After he was discharged, in his twenties, he thought that his Army days were behind him; his first feature film, which is currently screening at festivals, is an antiwar satire about Israeli spies. But on October 7th, soon after he saw news of the Hamas attack, Dekel reported for reserve duty. He was forty, right on the edge of what is technically considered combat age. He wasn't called up, he just got in his car and drove, leaving his family behind in Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom. Six months into the war, he was still serving, commuting each day to his unit. He made sure that no one in the village saw him in uniform or carrying a gun.

Before October 7th, perhaps the biggest rift in the history of Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom occurred in 1997, when a twenty-year-old soldier from the village, Tom Kitain, was killed in a helicopter accident near the Lebanese border. Elsewhere in Israel, Kitain would have been buried with military honors. His parents, who hadn't been happy about him joining the I.D.F., wanted only to memorialize their son at the site of a new basketball court. Many of the residents objected—they didn't want to commemorate an Israeli soldier in the community's public space. It took two years of meetings to decide what to do. In the end, a plaque was placed at the basketball court describing Kitain as "a boy of peace who was killed in war."

Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom's foundational hope—that peace would come in this lifetime—is, perhaps, one reason that Jewish adults there, from generation to generation, have failed to prepare their kids for the inevitability of conscription. Refusing to serve is a difficult step. Those who do—refuseniks—often spend weeks or months in military jail and effectively lose access to Israeli Jewish society's mechanisms of mobility. The professional skills and connections that Israeli Jews first acquire in the military will often form the basis of the rest of their careers.

A friend of one of Salaime's sons who had considered resisting the draft was Adam Ben Shabath, who is now twenty-three. Adam attended high school at a nearby kibbutz, where many of his friends were steeped in military culture and dreamed of getting into the best units. His father, Yair, urged Adam to join, too. "For you, this is a democratic state, and this is still the law," Yair told him. Adam oscillated. And then, one day, he was on a bus in the parking lot of the recruitment office. "You are eighteen years old," he recalled. "Suddenly, you have the uniform, you have this huge bag, you shaved your head a day ago. Suddenly, you are not yourself."

The bus was headed for a combat unit. Before it pulled out of the lot, Adam stood up and declared that he wouldn't serve. He spent a night in jail and was eventually placed with an intelligence unit on the border with Egypt. It's a recurrent theme in stories of Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom kids: their native-level Arabic can make them useful to Israeli intelligence. "I made peace with myself somehow," Adam said. "At least it wasn't combat. But I was still wearing the same uniform."

When his mandatory service was up, he returned to Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom. His family's house is large and a bit ostentatious, with an outdoor space big enough to host parties for the entire village. During the pandemic, Adam and his father, who owns an equestrian-footwear business, built a food trailer, decorated with a large peace sign on one side, which served as a kind of village club, with different families staffing it in shifts. Adam swore that he would never again have anything to do with the military. "The seventh of October changed that," he told me. "Suddenly, in one moment, I was in the military again."

Like Dekel, Adam reported for duty without waiting to be called up. "Then videos from Gaza started coming out, and I started questioning things again," he told me. "It's always a fight within me. I am part of Israeli norms, and I can also see both sides." His unit was stationed in the north, near the border with Lebanon. After a few months, Adam came home. He discovered that his father was using the food trailer to host barbecues for Israeli soldiers near the Gaza border. This didn't feel right. "I mean, it's a war," Adam told me. "I don't want to make it fun."

Yair Ben Shabath has lived in Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom for twenty years. In 1996, when Benjamin Netanyahu was first elected Prime Minister, Yair saw the ascent of the Israeli right as potentially disastrous. "I wasn't going to run for the Knesset," he said, referring to the Israeli legislature. "So I decided to submit myself to this lab experiment in what this country could be." He didn't hide who he was—a self-proclaimed Zionist who had served in the Army—and the community accepted him. "I don't think I'd be accepted now," he told me. A couple of days a week, he loads the trailer with food and musical instruments, which soldiers play as he cooks. In the village WhatsApp chat, he said that neighbors have accused him of "partying and shooting." He offers no apologies for supporting the troops. "I pushed my three kids to serve in the Army," he said. "What's a barbecue?"

Jonathan Dekel was assigned to an intelligence unit. He led a team that sifted through footage shot on the GoPro and cell-phone cameras of Hamas attackers, some of which later went into a forty-seven-minute video that the Israeli government screened for journalists around the world. Nearly twelve hundred Israelis and foreign nationals were killed that

day, and more than two hundred and fifty were taken hostage. In much of the footage that Dekel watched, the Hamas guys seemed to be taking their time, opening the fridge, sitting down, having a cigarette. Between unspeakable acts of violence, they behaved leisurely. They filmed themselves praying. They set curtains on fire as they left a house. Dekel called the experience of reviewing the footage a "scorching of the mind."

We were talking in an empty meeting room of the Pluralistic Spiritual Center. Dekel had brought in two chairs and placed them facing each other, as though for an interrogation. In the room next door, people were praying after the iftar dinner. At the end of the day, Dekel said, the Jews and the Palestinians are on one land, and neither of them is going anywhere. He would love for all of Israel to be one big Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom, but to say as much during wartime can seem dangerously naïve. "The whole thing is so primitive," he said.

Friends in the military have called him a radical and an anti-Zionist. Some of his Palestinian neighbors are deeply disappointed in him. Dekel still calls himself a Zionist, which he defines as believing that a Jewish state is the least bad solution. On his computer screen at work, where he now watches footage shot by Israeli troops, he saw weapons found in what seemed like every other apartment in Gaza. He saw Nazi memorabilia, including an annotated Arabic translation of "Mein Kampf," found in a child's bedroom that was being occupied by a Hamas member. And he also saw the death and destruction that Israel was inflicting on the civilians in Gaza. "I'm conflicted and perplexed," he said. "I am not at peace."

Before October 7th, hundreds of thousands of Israeli liberals spent nine months in the streets, protesting the Netanyahu administration's attempt to weaken the judiciary's oversight of the executive branch. A movement of military reservists who called themselves Brothers and Sisters in Arms were at the forefront, carrying Israeli flags and vowing to restore the country to what they saw as a robust democracy. The protests largely stopped after October 7th. The Brothers and Sisters, like the rest of the country, turned their attention to Gaza: some reported for duty; others took on rescue-and-relief work for people injured or displaced in the Hamas attack. Gradually, the protests resumed, first as public gatherings devoted primarily to mourning. By spring, they were reclaiming a boisterous, confrontational tone.

I went to one protest with Noam Shuster-Eliassi, a well-known comedian and activist who grew up in Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom. I met her on a street corner where the self-described radicals—fewer than two hundred people—stood in a loose circle, taking turns with a megaphone. Shuster-Eliassi told me that her political camp is vanishingly small. Her fiancé, Amit Merckado, was with us, wearing a T-shirt that said "FCK BNGVR." "I got the last non-Zionist guy who isn't gay or married," Shuster-Eliassi said. "And even within this tiny circle there are ruptures." She took the megaphone to shout, "A ceasefire is not enough! The blood of fourteen thousand children is on our hands!"

We walked toward the main protest, which began a block or two away. It was a sea of Israeli flags. A speaker, projected onto a giant video screen, announced that the protest was a hundred thousand strong. "I want rage," Shuster-Eliassi said. We snaked our way through the crowd. People were throwing torches on the ground, to build a bonfire. Friends and family members of the hostages, wearing red-and-black T-shirts, were chanting their demand: "Bring them home *now!*" It felt more like despair than rage.

At the main protest, the only calls for a ceasefire were framed in terms of securing the release of the estimated hundred and thirty hostages, living and dead, then being held by Hamas. Humanistic messages—calls to stop the killing of children and the infliction of starvation and disease in Gaza—remained marginal, even among the leftist radicals. Members of the Pink Front, a left-wing antifascist movement, were banging drums and chanting, "We are not afraid." The slogan had been adopted during the anti-Netanyahu protests that took place before October 7th. Since the Hamas attack, it has offered itself as a national affirmation for a country that remains very much afraid.

José Brunner, a philosopher and a historian of science, who retired from Tel Aviv University in 2018, has written on the emergence of "national trauma" as a key concept in Israeli mental-health discourse. The idea was imported from the United States, where, in the wake of 9/11, mental-health professionals hypothesized that a person did not need to be immediately affected by an event to be traumatized by it: repeated media exposure was enough. When the concept made its way to Israel, around the time of the second intifada, in the two-thousands, mental-health professionals built a trauma center for "victims of terror," interpreted broadly, and launched an annual publication, called *About Feelings*, a million copies of which were distributed on the national memorial day for fallen soldiers. The Israeli version of "national trauma" added a historical aspect: Israeli Jews, it posited, were traumatized by terror, and the spectre of terror, because of their shared history, going back to Biblical times.

As a clinical diagnosis, "national trauma" had a short shelf life. But the cultural concept stuck. What this has meant in the wake of October 7th is that Israeli television channels, without any apparent pressure from the state, have stayed singularly focussed on that day's massacre. An endless supply of footage from the Hamas attack allows reporters to continue producing stories. The only clues viewers might have that the date they are watching TV is not October 7th are feature stories on fallen soldiers—nearly three hundred members of the I.D.F. have been killed in the war, and every death is commemorated with a profile. Otherwise, Gaza is not in the picture. "We are fighting the war of October 7th, so October 7th has been extended for six months," Brunner told me, when I visited him at his house, in a quiet suburb of Tel Aviv. "This gives us absolute victimhood."

The advent of the idea of "national trauma" prompted researchers to ask how the concept applied to the one in five Israeli citizens who is not Jewish. A study conducted in 2005 found that Palestinian citizens of Israel were more psychologically vulnerable to the effects of the conflict than Jews were. "For Jewish Israelis, being in Israel has a meaning," Brunner said. "But Palestinians, who can also be hit by a rocket flying from Gaza, experience such an event as senseless victimization. They are not fighting the Palestinians—they are the Palestinians, but they

are also the victims of Palestinians who come here to attack." The infinite loop of coverage of October 7th elides not only the suffering in Gaza but also the non-Jewish victims of the Hamas attack. "One of the annoying things that Israeli society claims is that October 7th is against Jews," Salaime told me, even though the attackers killed indiscriminately.

After the protest, Shuster-Eliassi and I took the new light-rail tram to Jaffa, where she and Merckado live. Jaffa, an ancient city, was annexed by the much younger, majority-Jewish Tel Aviv, in 1950. Most of its Arab population was forced to flee in the nineteen-forties and, more recently, has been priced out. About a third of the current residents are Palestinians. We sat at an outdoor café. Shuster-Eliassi, whose mother is from Iran, talked about her discomfort with what passes for the left in Israel: predominantly Ashkenazi and firmly integrated with the establishment, including the military establishment. "On October 6th, Brothers in Arms were saying they wouldn't serve," she said. This was the reservists' most formidable threat to the Netanyahu government. "And on October 7th all the men were on their way somewhere," she continued, meaning to their units. "Suddenly, they weren't asking any questions."

Shuster-Eliassi, who is thirty-seven, encountered her first recruitment effort when she was still in high school: someone from an intelligence unit approached her because of her fluent Arabic. She refused to serve. "It was really clear that my brother and I would not go to the military," she told me. "I didn't learn Arabic from my neighbors so I could then spy on them."

After October 7th, she went to her childhood home in Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom. In the village, there was "overwhelming silence," but this was still better than the tsunami of vengeful militarism in the rest of the country. "It's like dating men," she said. "Your standards are so low: someone a little bit sane."

Shuster-Eliassi and Merckado were planning an August wedding with celebrations in Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom. In the morning, Shuster-Eliassi was going to try on wedding dresses at a salon in the occupied West Bank owned by a Palestinian friend. Salaime, who has known Shuster-Eliassi for decades, was going to come along. "She is more excited about the wedding than I am," Shuster-Eliassi said.

Samah Salaime, a Palestinian writer, raised her three sons in the village.

In March, *Haaretz*, a left-wing Israeli newspaper, reported that the human-rights organization B'Tselem was "tearing apart" in the wake of the Hamas attack. A longtime employee, Roy Yellin, was suing B'Tselem for wrongful dismissal, the result of a disagreement that would seem infinitesimal to an outsider. B'Tselem had issued a statement accusing both Hamas and Israel of "flagrant disregard for the rules of international humanitarian law." The chair of the organization wanted an announcement of the statement to be posted on Instagram, under an image of the phrase "Ceasefire Now." Yellin, who was the director of public outreach, insisted that the image also say "to protect civilians on both sides." He told me he felt that B'Tselem hadn't said enough about atrocities committed by Hamas. (B'Tselem had issued a statement on October 9th condemning the attack.) The leadership of the organization overrode him. In response, he locked them out of the Instagram account. Shortly afterward, he was fired.

I met Yuli Novak, the executive director of B'Tselem, who is also a friend, at a café in Tel Aviv. "You are either on the Israeli side or the Hamas side," she said, describing the public mood. "To be pro-Israel, you have to not only condemn Hamas but also say that everything that's happening in Gaza is Hamas's fault. To be pro-human is not an option." The café was decorated with golden statuettes of gummy bears, with black ribbons covering their eyes. An employee explained that the bears had been in the café "before," but that the black ribbons were added "after." Novak laughed nervously and said, "Everyone is trying to do something."

I asked whether such gestures reflected a sense of helplessness or a desire for belonging. "I have this yellow ribbon on my scooter, and it means a lot of things," Novak told me. "It means that there is something wrong and it's not a minor thing. More than two hundred people kidnapped. But also, the mass killing and the mass destruction that we have imposed on Gaza, on the Gazans—people are suffering, children are suffering, the numbers are huge, and I'm an Israeli. I can

"You need to stop eating in bed."

• •

dedicate my life to making Israel more like a place that reflects my values, but it's still the starting point, that identity."

Amid the fear and the despair of the last few months, a handful of Israelis have stepped forward to articulate a message of hope for the land. "Hope becomes a topic of interest in dark times," Oded Adomi Leshem, a political psychologist at Hebrew University, told me. On October 13th, Oxford University Press published his book, titled "Hope Amidst Conflict," in which Leshem proposes a "bi-dimensional" model of hope, where one dimension is "wish" (how much someone wants peace) and the other dimension is "expectation" (how likely someone thinks peace is). Leshem sees an opportunity in the current moment to "focus on the wish dimension" and offer Israelis a vision of peace that is "concrete, simple." He plans to assemble a sort of focus group of a thousand people, and then use artificial intelligence to synthesize ideas of what peace in Israel/Palestine could feel, sound, and smell like.

Maoz Inon, a social entrepreneur, once proposed to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through tourism. In 2005, he began building a chain of hostels and tour companies throughout Israel and the occupied territories. The concept, not that dissimilar from the original idea of Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom, was that bringing together Jews and Palestinians, fostering trust, and building economic mechanisms for local communities could sow the seeds of peace. On October 7th, Inon's parents were killed by Hamas fighters, as were several of his childhood friends. Within weeks, Inon was calling for a renewed joint peace movement. "All conflicts end one day," he told me. "It's up to us to decide when." Another Jewish Israeli who has cautioned against revenge is Yonatan Zeigen, the son of Vivian Silver, the murdered Canadian Israeli activist. In November, when it was still believed that Silver was being held hostage in Gaza, Zeigen said to an interviewer, "Dead babies in Gaza won't heal our dead babies. The only way to move forward is with peace."

In 2017, Sally Abed, a Palestinian citizen of Israel who grew up in a village in western Galilee, joined Standing Together, an organization that aspires to build a Palestinian-Jewish mass movement for a joint future. The group has grown significantly in the past year, reaching nearly six thousand dues-paying members, with fourteen chapters around the country. After October 7th, Abed and one of Standing Together's other leaders, Alon-Lee Green, who is Jewish, went on two speaking tours of the United States. Abed has no illusions about what makes the organization such an appealing face of hope—they are addressing Jews as partners. In March, when Standing Together organized a convoy of food aid to Gaza, the group documented the convoy's journey on Instagram, with commentary emphasizing how the effort would benefit Israeli hostages: "When there is hunger in Gaza, they're also hungry."

Some on the Israeli left cringed. Abed has no time for purists. "It's an immense privilege to be able to speak, and I'm not giving that up for performative statements," she said. "What gives us our safety is the very basic question of any politics. That's literally the existential question the Israeli public is living with. And no one is giving them an answer except the right." The convoy never made it to Gaza—it was stopped by Israeli forces—and the food was eventually distributed to families in the West Bank.

Near the end of my trip, I saw Novak again, at an iftar dinner in Um al-Kheir, a Bedouin village in the South Hebron Hills. The Jewish settlement of Carmel—rows of stucco houses with red roofs—had begun on the hill above Um al-Kheir, and now its chain-link fence butted up against the biggest tent in the village. B'Tselem activists had come with three European diplomats to hear firsthand accounts of the ramped-up pressure and violence that the villagers had faced since October 7th. Among other things, the settlers had been blocking the use of Um al-Kheir's own pastureland. The village's goats and sheep were now wandering between tents, looking emaciated.

At sundown, a dinner of lamb and rice was served, and Novak stood up to speak. "I don't know how you feel, but most of the time I feel quite lonely, because my society doesn't speak the same language," she said, addressing about sixty people who had gathered in the big tent. "When I'm here, I know that we all share the same values and goals, and these goals are to end the occupation and apartheid." Behind her, on the other side of the fence, two or three settler men were pacing back and forth. They were dressed in military uniforms and carrying guns.

Nearly everyone I spoke to on my visit to Israel—even lifelong peace activists—talked about leaving the country. In Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom, there were rumors that some of the peo-

ple who could afford it, both Palestinians and Jews, had bought backup apartments in places such as Cyprus or Greece; some of the younger people had already moved abroad or were making plans to. Yair Ben Shabath, the businessman who throws barbecues for soldiers, said, "Physically, I am here, but mentally I am starting to leave."

On the morning of October 7th, when reports of the Hamas attack on Kibbutz Be'eri and other parts of the south began coming in, Ben Shabath wrote in the village WhatsApp chat, "May God have mercy on the children of Gaza." He explained, "I knew that Be'eri would be over in a couple of days. But in Gaza it would be a holocaust." A Jewish neighbor immediately replied that God should have mercy on *all* of the children. Weeks later, a Palestinian neighbor referred to Itamar Ben-Gvir, the extremist right-wing minister of national security, as a Nazi. Ben Shabath was still upset about the comment when we spoke this spring. "It is a holocaust," he said. "But we are not Nazis. The holocaust is a result of what happened. But we didn't build a killing machine like the Nazis. And we didn't kill them because they are Arabs." (Ben Shabath now says that "holocaust" does not accurately describe the situation in Gaza.)

I have been visiting Israel for decades. This was the first time that the psychic divide between most left-wing Jews and settlers seemed smaller than that between left-wing Jews and Palestinians. One longtime Jewish anti-occupation activist said that he had been inconsolable for months following October 7th. Part of the tragedy, for him, was what he experienced as the silence of his Palestinian colleagues and collaborators. "It's not easy to reach across and say, 'This is horrible,'" the activist acknowledged. "I think of it as training a muscle. Some Israelis are trained—that's not because we are better people, it's because we are citizens of a bad country." In recent months, some Palestinian colleagues have reached out privately, but two things are missing for him: a public expression of solidarity on the part of Palestinian human-rights activists and a reassurance that they see a just future in which Palestinians and Jews can live together. He'd previously had "a growing sense of camaraderie based on a shared vision and a sense of urgency." Now, he went on, "I'm not confident what remains of that vision."

In the days following October 7th, many Palestinian citizens of Israel were silent because they were terrified—scared of Hamas, of right-wing violence, and of the Israeli state, which immediately started cracking down on Palestinian speech. Also, they are human. If you are a Palestinian and your first thought, however fleeting, wasn't about the suffering of your own people—the displacement, the occupation, the decades of violence and harassment—and the retaliation to come, then you are superhuman. Many Israeli Jews who have worked against the occupation for years, who were targeted by their own government and ostracized by their own neighbors and families, expected their Palestinian counterparts to be superhuman at this moment—because the Jewish activists felt that they'd been superhuman for Palestinians. To the Palestinians, though, these activists had simply been a small minority of Israeli Jews who were honest and decent.

When I told a friend in Ramallah about what Novak calls "the condemnation discourse," she asked, "Still?" My friend didn't mean that the atrocities committed by Hamas had been somehow diminished by the passage of time, just that the need to state the obvious might have lost its urgency in the face of ever more human suffering. But for most Israelis, including on the left, the urgency seems only to have grown, and for many of them, it has made it close

to impossible to see the suffering of the Palestinians. Even Maoz Inon acknowledged, "The gap between Israelis and Palestinians was never as wide as it is today."

Maayan Schwartz, a filmmaker who grew up in Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom, told me that the tensions in the village were mostly playing out in the WhatsApp group. "When I go to pick up my daughter from kindergarten, or in the street, it's all normal," he said. He lives on the first floor of his parents' old house. His brother, Omer, and his family are on the floor above. Maayan is tall and lanky, with a trimmed beard. Many of my questions—about military service, about the relationship between Palestinian and Jewish residents—made him fidget. After high school, he joined the military. He was never in combat; he spent his three years of service fixing computers. Still, the parents of some of his classmates—he was the only Jewish boy in his year—did not accept his decision to serve. "To this day, I am having a conversation in my mind with people in the village about going to the Army," he said. The arguments against it, he went on, are "very much pacifist, and I don't think I am a pacifist. I don't think you can be a pacifist in this part of the world."

A week later, I hung out with Maayan and several of his childhood friends on Omer's balcony. Most of the friends were Palestinians. One was still living in Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom; a few others were visiting during the final week of Ramadan. They drank wine, smoked joints, and talked about their feelings of uncertainty. Carlo, who works as a reflexologist in Jerusalem, said that business had never been better—people had never been so tense—but that he was afraid his clients would realize he was Palestinian. He was considering a move to Berlin. Omer, a visual-effects artist, talked about the absurdity of being offered a pension plan when it felt as if the world were ending. They talked about propaganda on television and Israelis' inability to understand why the world's support for their country was faltering.

They were like brothers, Maayan said: instead of growing up with large extended families, as Palestinians often do, they grew up with one another. Even those who were living outside of Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom remained a part of the community, voting members of the village, and active participants in the WhatsApp group. They were, in other words, living the model that their parents had hoped to build: two people, one place, where no one is going anywhere and everyone must learn to live together. They agreed on most things—justice, equality, an end to the occupation. They disagreed on military service, a subject that they had learned to avoid. ♦

CHICAGO ON THE SEINE

CAMILLE BORDAS

ILLUSTRATION BY GIANMARCO MAGNANI

I used to tell myself stories on the job, to make it feel exciting—spy stories, exfiltration stories, war stories. I used to come up with poignant little details that turned the repatriation cases I worked on into "Saving Private Ryan," into "Johnny Got His Gun." *Repatriation*—there's such a ring to it, such drama. I imagined maimed bodies in dirty tents, nurses changing brown, bloodied gauze, bending over beds to tell the wounded, "The call came in—you're going home." Yet I worked in Special Consular Services at our Embassy in Paris. The Americans I helped repatriate mostly broke legs in Pigalle or crashed rental cars in Normandy. Miracles didn't happen for them in Lourdes—people don't talk about it, but those for whom miracles don't happen in Lourdes tend to leave France in worse shape than they arrived in.

Occasionally, I had to send a body home. What I'd noticed was that death abroad was more common on package tours. It appeared that, contrary to popular belief, the group didn't lift you up but in fact granted you permission to go soft and fall ill. A group needed a weakest link, demanded it, and there was always a chance that you would be that link.

Eva Glasper exemplified this. She'd died the night before, collapsing after a three-course dinner on the Right Bank. She'd been in Paris for an engineering conference, not on vacation, but the idea was the same: for three days, she'd been part of a group, followed the group's every move, and she'd died in a foreign land, alone among strangers.

I'd talked to her daughter Lisa twice already. Lisa wanted the repatriation process started right away, her mother's body back in Boston ASAP. I skipped lunch to make arrangements with the shipping-and-receiving funeral homes, with de Gaulle and Logan airports, and, when I called Lisa again to let her know that her mother would be on a cargo plane to Boston first thing in the morning, I expected gratitude for my fast and efficient work. She was, however, disappointed. She'd hoped repatriation would happen that day.

"I don't like the idea of Mom spending another night alone at the morgue," she said. "So far away from home."

"I know it's difficult," I said.

"Is there someone you can recommend to keep watch over her?"

I knew what she meant, I believe, but still I played dumb. I asked if she meant a priest.

"Not a priest," she said. "Someone who could stay with Mom all night, someone nice, preferably, who will explain to her what happened."

"Right," I said.

"I'm not crazy," Lisa said, before telling me that the hours after death were critical: bodies should not be left alone and uncared for. If the dead were alone for too long before burial, they could be driven to disquiet, volatility, and eternal roaming. She used the phrase "spectral invasion."

"My mother wasn't ill," she went on. "She wasn't preparing for this to happen, so her spirit is probably very confused right now. Confused and angry. That's the worst combination. That's a recipe for spectral invasion."

I perceived no hint of shame in her voice as she admitted to believing in ghosts.

The TV was on in front of me, covering Hurricane Jared's progress toward Florida, four thousand miles away. U.S. news played in the background nonstop at the Embassy now. We used to watch it only during political crises and human catastrophes, but I guess someone had failed to turn it off at some point, weeks or months before, and we'd all tacitly agreed to wait for the next disaster to come to us live.

"We can't let my mother become a ghost," Lisa said. Then she added that I sounded like a nice guy, that maybe *I* could go sit with her mother's corpse. She would pay me for my troubles, she said. I didn't want to spend the night with a dead body, but I was curious to hear how much she'd pay, so I pretended to think about it. I let a little bit of silence take hold. I looked around our open space, then up at the TV again—silent images of planes grounded in Tampa, men nailing plywood to windows in Naples, women praying in Fort Myers.

"Mr. White? Are you still there?"

I Googled Eva Glasper while her daughter spoke. I'd seen her passport photo in her file, but a person never looks less herself than in a passport photo. I wanted to see snapshots from real life. I wanted to see whether Eva Glasper had the makings of a ghost, whether she'd been handed a raw deal and might feel cheated, justified in her "eternal roaming," in her anger and her demands. If I believed what movies said about ghosts (and movies were, as far as the topic went, all I had to go on), something all of them had in common was that they wanted reparation. According to her posts on Facebook, though, Eva Glasper seemed to have had a happy life, to have lacked for nothing. No rants, only gratitude for her family and for her colleagues at M.I.T., appreciation posts for her favorite TV show, "For All Mankind," despite most of the science in it being "off." When it came to fiction, I knew that some people were able to engage only with material they had the capacity to correct. My mother had been that way. As a nurse, she'd loved to spot all the errors in "E.R.," but it was still her favorite show. She said that the writers had got something right about the E.R. that made you look past all the fuckups.

I told Lisa I would find someone to sit by her mother.

Minutes after I hung up, Marianne came over to my desk for a chat. I wondered if it was something she felt obliged to do now that we'd broken up, to prove to herself that we were over each other, that there was nothing left there. Maybe she thought she was being nice. She reminded me that today was my father's birthday.

"You don't have to do this anymore," I said. "Remind me of things."

"Have you talked to him yet?"

"It's still early in Chicago."

"When you do, tell him I said hi. And happy birthday."

I hadn't told my dad about the breakup yet. Not that it would've pained him, or caused him to worry; we just didn't talk about these things. My father and I mostly talked about movies, to be honest. Sometimes TV. But mostly movies. Marianne had found it sad when we visited him in Chicago the previous summer. Our dynamic. She'd said that I should let my father in on the details of my days, that, if I never had a conversation with him about my life, I would regret it when he was gone. "Movies are part of my life," I'd told her. "I watch them."

"How are you otherwise?" she asked now.

I told her about my phone call with Lisa Glasper, her request that I keep her

mother's body company at the morgue so that she wouldn't become a ghost.

"How much money did she offer?"

"Five hundred dollars," I said.

"I can't tell if that's stingy or not. Five hundred? To sit with her mom's dead body all night?"

"And lead her spirit into the good place," I said.

"Are you going to do it?"

I couldn't accept the money, of course, Marianne and I both knew it, but it was still fun to consider it, to turn that sum at different angles against the light and ponder its meaning.

"I wonder what she heard in your voice that made her think you'd be a good fit for the job," Marianne added. "You could be a total creep, for all she knows."

"I told her my mother was also from Boston," I said. "I think that created a bond."

"But your mother wasn't from Boston," Marianne said.

"When you're dealing with bereaved families, you have to establish trust," I said. "A bond. The veracity of the bond is irrelevant."

"You establish trust by lying to them?"

"It's not like I'm dating this girl," I said. I studied Marianne's reaction to the word "dating." Something was bothering her, but it wasn't the idea that I could (and would, in all likelihood) date another woman in the future.

"I can't believe you told this stranger anything about your mother," she said.

"I didn't. You said so yourself—my mother wasn't actually from Boston."

"You know what I mean. You never talked to *me* about your mother."

There it was. Marianne was jealous, but not romantically so. She'd always wanted me to talk more, to open up to her. For the past two years, she'd tried to get to the bottom of my childhood trauma (my mother's death when I was ten), to understand how it had shaped my world view, and I'd resisted, valiantly, assuring her that my world view was not to linger on the past.

"Do you want me to tell you something about my mother?" I asked. Now that we wouldn't grow old together, it didn't seem so appalling to let her know more about myself.

"Of course!" Marianne said. "What was she like?"

"She believed in ghosts, actually. My mother. Just like Lisa Glasper."

"Really?"

Marianne's "Really?" made me doubt myself. That was the problem with talking about the dead. Even when you were pretty sure you were telling the truth, you could never feel a hundred per cent like you were. How could you be sure the person hadn't changed her mind before dying, or wouldn't have, if given a little more information, a little more time? You had too much power, when speaking of the dead. They had the double disadvantage of not being able to fight you if you said something false about them, and of not having had access to any of the new knowledge the world had amassed since they'd died. I often thought that that was the worst thing about dying: that all your last positions and opinions became fixed forever, that you couldn't change your mind anymore. It made you look stupid.

I didn't know whether my mother really believed in ghosts. She might've been serious when she'd said it, she might've been joking. What I knew for sure was that I'd grown up afraid of everything—the dark, gusts of wind, falling ice. My mother had started showing me horror movies and ghost movies way too early, as an attempt, I believe, to make me less of a wimp. I admired those guys who went down unlit basement stairs after hearing strange sounds in the middle of the night, but her efforts didn't really work, no matter how many times she told me that ghosts were scary, yes, but ultimately harmless. "Like Dad," she once said. "A little gruff on the outside, but truly kindhearted. They just want our help!" I didn't tell her that the idea that my father could need our help was the scariest thing of all. We kept watching ghost movies. We spent a lot of Sundays discussing what we would do if we became ghosts ourselves, who we would mess with. She told me that, if she ever died, she would come haunt me, but not in a scary way, just to hang out, to watch ghost movies with me on Sundays and explain what the movies had got right and wrong about the afterlife. It had sounded fun, the idea of watching ghost movies with a ghost, but then my mother got ill, and, on top of fearing that she'd die, I became scared that she'd die and follow up on her haunting plans. I spent the last weeks of her life wanting to ask her not to come back after her death, but not asking for fear of hurting her feelings. What ten-year-old didn't want his mother to come back from the dead to watch movies with him on Sundays?

On the TV, over Marianne's shoulder, the same weatherman I'd been glancing at since the morning was gesturing over an animation of Hurricane Jared, like he was trying to wipe it. I wondered if he actually knew anything about meteorology, or if he was just an actor saying his lines. Behind his hand movements, the hurricane was all the colors of the rainbow, like a pinwheel, a swirl lollipop.

"Do you know anything about the color code?" I asked Marianne.

"What? Are we still talking about your mother?"

"No. Do you know anything about the color code in hurricane graphics?"

"I think it has to do with wind speeds," Marianne said, without turning around to look. "Different colors for different wind speeds."

I said I didn't understand how there could be different wind speeds within the same hurricane and the hurricane could still move along as one, at one single speed.

My father called me at work around 4 P.M. It was only 9 A.M. in Chicago, but I knew he'd already been up for hours, scanning national and local news for things to get furious about.

"Did you see about the horses?" he said.

Two horses had died on a movie set in California. My father couldn't bear the thought of animals being used for entertainment.

"Happy birthday!"

"There'd better be consequences," my father said, about the horses.

I imagined the apartment around him, our too-thick-and-too-long curtains, all that extra fabric at the bottom bunched up on the floor like dirty laundry. As a kid, I'd had fantasies about chopping it off.

"Any special plans for the day?"

"Define 'special,'" my dad said.

I said, "Lunch, maybe? Bowling? A beer with a friend?"

"Barra's coming over later," he said.

"We're watching 'The Hustler' tonight. Maybe we'll have a beer."

My father had this friend he watched movies with once a week. Another widower, not especially bright. When I'd first met Barra, as a teen, I'd been embarrassed that my dad had made friends with such a dimwit, but then Barra had had us over for dinner, and, seeing how clean and bright his apartment was, meeting his own son and being introduced to his DVD collection, I'd become embarrassed about us, our apartment with the curtains, the grime on the laminated counters, the ugly VHS shelf. My father had resisted DVDs for way too long. He still had our tapes, in fact, the ones with real titles that he'd bought and the blank ones we'd recorded a million movies over, the labels on their spines a geological record of my childhood, movie and show titles crossed out every time we taped new movies and new shows over them, layers upon layers:

~~Miami Vice~~ ~~Churchill documentary~~ ~~Quantum Leap~~
~~Duel/Night Court~~ Blade Runner DO NOT ERASE

Either we reached that "Blade Runner" stage—something worth keeping forever—or we kept going, erasing and erasing until we couldn't, in all conscience, ask more of the tape, until random split seconds from "Knight Rider" emerged in the middle of "Stand by Me," until it looked like the ghosts of previously recorded movies had come to haunt the new ones. Sometimes I pictured the tape thinning and thinning, scenes pressing on other scenes, fighting for space. At some point, we retired the tape. It always felt bad retiring a tape on an insignificant note, a just-O.K. movie, but it was better, I thought, than insisting on finding the tape's ideal content and risking having the strip snap.

"Marianne says hi," I said.

"O.K.," my dad said.

I considered telling him about the breakup, or about Eva Glasper, but he wanted to talk about the dead horses in Hollywood.

"I don't buy that they died of food poisoning," he said. "I think someone poisoned them deliberately."

Our unit's secretary came to my desk and handed me a padded envelope.

"A courier left this for you at reception," she said, and I was glad to have my father on the phone as she said it. He probably got a kick out of hearing that line—he probably imagined himself involved in glamorous international intrigue simply for overhearing it. *A courier left this for you at reception.* He loved spy movies. I think that he (like I once had) still wanted to daydream, or perhaps actually believe, that my work at the Embassy was cover for something better.

"You have to go?" he said to me on the phone. "Sounds important."

I had no idea what my father imagined about my life. Did he think my work was risky? Did he think I was a brave man, fighting evil in the shadows?

"It's nothing," I said, before deciding to give him a little thrill, to play along with his fantasy. It was his birthday, after all. "I just need to help get someone out of the country."

"Someone important?"

"You know I can't disclose that kind of information."

The padded envelope contained Eva Glasper's personal items, found at the restaurant where her heart had stopped. Her packed suitcase, and everything she'd had at the hotel, had been sent straight to de Gaulle for her transport the next day, and what she'd had on her person at the hospital was now with her at the morgue, but the restaurant hadn't known where to send the thin notebook she'd put by her plate, along with the complimentary pen she'd received from the Paris Aerospace Conference. I leafed through the notebook. She'd taken a lot of notes, sketched many cryptic diagrams, made a handful of quick yet precise technical drawings. This notebook was the kind of object a prop master would've wanted for a movie about industrial espionage, either to cut to quickly in a mad-scientist scene (scientist up all night, surrounded by her notes and open textbooks) or to place at the center of the plot (a notebook with calculations holding the answer to global warming, the key to humanity's survival). I'd always wondered who made these things, the crazy notebooks in movies—if one guy in Hollywood was known for them and filled three or four a year with equations, drawings, and maps, and whether his work was led by scientific truth or by aesthetics. I knew that Eva Glasper's notebook was real, that it contained real science, but it still looked fake to me.

"I'll let you go, then," my father said, and did.

Eva Glasper's body was on the Left Bank. I took a bus there, and as it crossed the Seine my brain glitched for a second. Instead of registering the Eiffel Tower ahead, it supplied a Chicago insert, the Whirlpool building. This had happened to me before on buses over rivers. Crossing a bridge on foot never did it, but something about the specific speed of a bus got my brain reaching for old images, giving me temporary access to a non-updated version of me. The former version of me had taken the LaSalle bus every week, to see an allergist downtown. After the bridge was the Whirlpool building, and, since then, that was apparently what my lizard brain expected and prepared my eyes for when I crossed

"Just because I paint sad bananas doesn't mean I am a sad banana."

a bridge on a bus. The same thing had happened in my previous postings, at our Embassy in Cairo and at our consulate in Sevilla. The Whirlpool building over every river. Chicago on the Nile, Chicago on the Guadalquivir.

The morgue used to be a public place in Paris. Back in the nineteenth century, I'd read, you could just go in to see who'd been stabbed the night before, who'd jumped into the river. People showed up every day for entertainment. Thousands of them. I guessed some also went in fear, because their husbands hadn't come home, or their children were missing, but for the most part Parisians went there for fun. Access to the morgue is of course restricted nowadays, but a diplomatic I.D. gets you in almost anywhere, and I was prepared to show mine at reception. There was no one at reception, though. No reception to speak of, really—the door to the small stone building simply opened onto a hallway, off of which branched other hallways. I didn't want to accidentally stumble on a dead body—I'd come to see Eva Glasper's, to make sure Eva Glasper's ghost didn't leave Eva Glasper's body, and seeing any other body would've felt wrong, like stealing—so I kept my eyes down as I walked the hallways. After a minute I heard something, other footfalls, and followed the sound.

"May I help you?"

I assumed she was a mortician. She wore scrubs and purple Crocs.

I said I was looking for Mrs. Glasper.

"Are you family?"

"I'm from the American Embassy. I talked to your colleague on the phone earlier."

She asked for identification and led me to the body.

"I was just finishing working on her," she said. "I haven't seen anything suspicious so far."

"Why would you have?"

She figured that, if the Embassy had sent me, it meant Eva Glasper had been more than a simple engineer, or that we suspected some kind of foul play.

"I've just come to pay my respects," I said.

I didn't think she believed me.

She offered to leave me alone with the body, but once she left the room it became hard to remember why I'd come. Was I supposed to talk to Eva Glasper? Her daughter had wished for someone to explain the "situation" to her, but could I communicate it telepathically, or did I have to utter actual words? I dragged a stool closer and sat for a while. What *was* the situation? I wondered. What remained unclear to Eva Glasper's soul or spirit or ghost, if it was still floating somewhere over us in the room?

"There's been an accident," I said. "You died."

And then: "I brought you your notebook."

After a minute, it didn't feel as uncomfortable as I'd thought it would, sitting there talking to her. It did feel like she was still with us in some way, in some unthreatening way. Maybe her daughter was right, maybe something of the deceased did linger in the hours following death, and you had to guide it somehow, or let it know you were there while it figured out where to go.

I told Eva Glasper about the horses in California, which had died almost exactly when she had. She might meet their spirits where she was headed, perhaps even ride them all the way there. It sounded corny, but it was freeing to be corny, to let out clichés and comforting words. I knew they had no truth, but for generations they'd made death bearable. At least for a little while. I remembered reading somewhere that death was easy to understand at first, that it was only the amount of time it lasted that was incomprehensible.

After about twenty minutes, I heard a sound, like someone clicking a pen through a loudspeaker. I asked Eva Glasper what she thought it was, and immediately regretted doing so. You could always pretend that the dead were good listeners, but asking them a question broke the spell. I assumed that Eva Glasp-

A BIG RED SHINY APPLE

One snowy Xmas morning
she said, "Son, come here
& give me a great big hug."
She lifted him off the floor,
her bright flowery perfume
on his Hopalong Cassidy
outfit, & his two cap pistols
also. Then she sat him down
in his chair, & he heard a tear
in her strong voice saying
"Oh, yeah, I got something
for you," as she handed him
a green ball with silver stars
all over it. He slowly peeled
off the glossy paper, & he just
held the apple as if it were
golden. He took a small bite
of cool sweet white, & smiled
as he slipped the green paper
into a pocket. His Granny said,
"I'm broke, but bless the food
that can't wait. Now, go wash
your hands, & I set the table.
Where's your mama & daddy?
You came here all by yourself.
Even if next door's a whistle.
You still naggin' them 'bout
makin' you a baby sister, boy?"

—Yusef Komunyakaa

er's ghost had ideas about what the sound had been (something to do with the cooling system, most likely), but, because she couldn't voice responses anymore, my asking her a question might have been humiliating. Maybe Eva Glasper was angry right now, which was the exact situation her daughter had feared, an angry ghost refusing her new quarters. I imagined her ghost exploding in silent rage above my head, a breach in the fabric of life, a reversal, spectral invasion. I imagined Eva Glasper trading places with me, taking over my life while I took her spot in the cargo plane tomorrow, the grave in Boston. A change in narration—Eva Glasper narrating my life from now on, starting right now, this very evening. Would I even notice? Would she have to be me, or would she bring herself and all her knowledge about aeronautical engineering into my body with her? Would she love the same people I loved, or dismiss them and pick new ones, men and women I had never noticed? We heard the clicking sound again.

I've always wanted to try, came a thought (mine or hers?)

a different body.

I picked up the notebook I'd left by her side, worried but also oddly thrilled by the possibility that its contents might suddenly make sense to me. Because I had become her, or she had become me. But it was all still gibberish.

The mortician knocked, and let me know she'd soon have to put Eva Glasper's body back in the cold. She saw the notebook in my hands and said, "I read to them sometimes, too."

She was holding a magazine in her right hand and gave it a shake, as if to prove her assertion.

"I wasn't reading to her, I—" I looked down at the notebook and closed it. "Here, will you add this to her personal items?"

The mortician came closer, but didn't grab the notebook. She looked like she'd been crying.

"I can't add anything," she said. "All her stuff is in a sealed bag. I can't mess with it. You'll have to send it to the family yourself."

Perhaps she was still crying.

"Or keep it," she added. "She's not going to need it."

"Are you all right?" I asked.

She said she could give me five more minutes, and I assumed she would leave the room again, but she sat across from me, on the other side of Eva Glasper, and started reading her magazine. The way she'd folded it, I could make out that she was reading an article about Thomas Pesquet, the French astronaut. The famous photograph of Pesquet reading "The Little Prince" in the International Space Station illustrated it. He was going to space again in a few weeks. The mortician sniffled softly.

"I hate Thomas Pesquet," I said, trying to cheer her up. "He's smart and good-looking, and, what, he gets to leave Earth whenever he wants, too? How lucky can a person get?"

For some reason, this made the mortician cry harder. Her name was Romy.

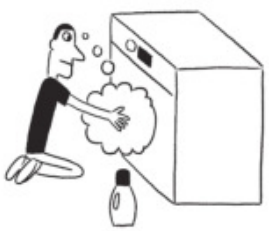
"I'm sure he worked very hard to get where he is," she said.

"I'm sorry," I said, not sure exactly what I was apologizing for. "You're right."

I looked at Eva Glasper's face, the eyes so still under their lids. She'd had an opinion on Thomas Pesquet, I assumed, just yesterday. An opinion on the whole space program. Now fixed. Now unchangeable.

"It must be hard, working here," I said to Romy, who'd got up from her chair to blow her nose. "It must get lonely."

Romy said she loved being alone. Her boyfriend had just broken up with her, and that was hard on her ego, of course, that was why she was fragile right now, but really the idea of being on her



own again was alluring, *badass*, even, she said—she used the English word.

"I'm sorry you had to see this, though," she added. "I don't usually cry in front of strangers."

"No need to apologize."

"I like to think I'm prepared for the bad stuff," she said. "I mean, I work here. I've seen it all. But, you know, life can still surprise you. I guess that's a good thing?"

She said she'd seen many people come here over the years, to see family members one last time, and that most of them didn't talk to her, but that some did, and either said things like *I always knew something like this would happen* or *I didn't even know anything like this could happen*, and it was hard to know who was better off, those who'd always known and to some extent prepared for the bad thing to happen, or the unprepared.

"The bad thing happens regardless," she said.

She put her magazine down and offered me a KitKat bar.

"I think the unprepared are better off," I said, declining the KitKat.

"All that tells me about you is that you're the preparing kind."

She chewed her KitKat for a while. I admired people who chewed their food extensively; I found them patient and serious. I often swallowed things whole. I'd scratched my throat on pointy bread crumbs many times—my pharynx had to be all scar tissue. I wondered if Romy would ever work on someone she knew, a friend's body, an acquaintance. Perhaps she'd work on me when I died, if I died in Paris.

"You said you read," I said, "but do you ever talk to them?"

"The bodies? Of course I do. I talked to her all afternoon."

She put a hand on Eva Glasper's hair.

"Do you ever take photos of them?"

It was something I'd wanted to do when my mother had died. I'd had the thought that it would help me down the line, to remember that she was truly gone, but I'd known not to ask my father.

"Sometimes I have to, for legal," Romy said. "But mostly no. I don't do weird shit. I don't even tell them jokes. You have to act as if someone's always watching."

"Like God?"

"More like cameras," she said.

"Are there? Cameras?"

I must've looked alarmed, because she burst out laughing and said, "I knew it! I knew you were going to do some weird shit. You left something on her body, didn't you? Did you hide some state secret? A microchip in her mouth?"

On my way home, I passed a movie theatre that occasionally went all night on Fridays, for Horror Night, New Hollywood Night, Rom-Com Night, whatever they had on hand. For eighteen

euros, they played three or four films back to back and served you breakfast in the morning. Today, because it was late September and the universities were again in session, the theme was "Back to School," a triple feature for students and the nostalgia-ridden: "The Graduate," "Wonder Boys," and "The Social Network." I went in. There were short breaks between the movies, for people to go to the bathroom or step out for a cigarette, but I stayed in my seat. I wanted the movies to blend together.

I didn't stay for breakfast. I didn't want to discuss the movies with strangers. I'd discussed them all with my father already, long ago. My opinions of them hadn't changed. I went to a nearby café, sat on the terrace. Reading the *Times* on my phone, I learned that, at some point while I was watching "Wonder Boys," Hurricane Jared had made landfall in Florida. They were starting to tally the cost of the damage.

An American couple and their daughter sat a few tables away, and I listened to their conversation. They were loud enough for that. They'd been in Paris for two days, they knew how to order coffee now—she wanted a *grand crème* and he an *allongé*. They'd seen the Rodin Museum and the Orsay. They would shop across the street at Le Bon Marché after breakfast and take a cruise on the Seine in the afternoon. It sounded nice to be in Paris on vacation.

I watched a plane fly a few thousand feet above us and pondered this discrepancy, that there was little in life more stressful than being on an airplane, and little so soothing as watching one at cruising altitude from below—the possibilities! The miracle of human engineering! Where could the plane be going? It was too early for it to be the one that carried Eva Glasper's body.

The café was relatively empty, and the waiter, perhaps envisioning an American tip, asked the family if they were enjoying Paris so far. The father said he was learning a lot. The Arenas of Lutetia had left quite an impression on him. To think that the Roman Empire had spread all the way up here, that maybe he'd been walking the same ground as Julius Caesar . . . how *wild*, he said. It now made sense to him that Europeans and Americans should be so different, have such different approaches to life and time. How could they not?

It used to embarrass me when Americans in Europe said out loud what everyone else had noticed or thought about before but deemed too obvious to share. I thought Europeans were already convinced we were idiots—there was no need to give them more ammunition. Over time, though, I'd realized that it wasn't so much that Europeans thought we were idiots as that they understood us to be simply less ashamed than they were, and, in the end, I've concluded they're jealous of our confidence. Our belief that, maybe, we were the first to have thought of something, that we might ever say something new. The confidence could play against us, too. It grated on people. Bar fights could erupt in the Latin Quarter because an American had talked too much. (I'd repatriated many victims of bar fights over the years.) I hoped the American family would keep enjoying their Paris trip and nothing would happen to them. Perhaps it was to make sure of that that, after they'd settled the bill, I waited a few minutes and followed them into Le Bon Marché. I kept my distance, but I followed.

I followed them first to the toy section, which looked more like an art installation, plush toys hanging from the ceiling, exploded Lego structures under glass cases. The daughter was afraid to touch anything.

"Do they actually sell sets here?" I heard the father say.

The for-sale Lego boxes were indeed quite concealed, piled deep under the display tables.

"It's like they're ashamed to admit they want our money," the mother said.

I followed them through the shoe section after that, through purses, through cosmetics. I heard the lady at the Chanel counter ask the mother, in English, if she and her daughter would like to have their makeup done. The mother looked hurt to have been recognized as so obviously American, but she said, "Yes, why not?" The Chanel lady sat the girl and her mother in high chairs, and started working on their faces simultaneously, like a chess grandmaster.

The father, knowing he was in for a twenty-minute wait at least, started looking around for ways to pass the time. He noticed me. "You were next to us at the café!" he said. He didn't seem to find that odd. Not for a second did he think that a stranger could've followed his family around. It was all a fun coincidence to him, probably meaningful. I felt guilty for following them. If he asked what I was doing in Paris, I was ready to answer that I was here for the aerospace conference, to show him Eva Glasper's pen and notebook as proof, but instead he asked what I was doing in the department store. I was shopping for my own wife and daughter, I told him. I was going home tomorrow, had been here on business—the girls would want something from France. He asked how old my daughter was. With all the lies I'd told so far, it's hard to explain why this one gave me a hard time, but I froze. I couldn't come up with a made-up age for my invented daughter. The man seemed to understand reasons for my silence that I couldn't possibly have hinted at, and he patted me on the shoulder. We worried so much about our girls, he said, that we simply forgot to watch them grow. My daughter was probably two years older than I thought she was, he joked, before taking me around the jewelry section. I shouldn't try to be too creative, according to him, I should just get her a simple necklace, a gold chain with a charm, the first letter of her name, perhaps? A timeless piece. I got out of Le Bon Marché five hundred euros lighter—just a touch more than what Lisa Glasper would've paid me had I accepted her money. A necklace for my daughter, a leather clutch for my wife.

I parted ways with the Americans on the sidewalk. The lady at the Chanel counter had made the girl look much older and her mother years younger, enhancing a feeling I'd had before, after staying too long in department stores, that these places were like busted time portals, that time moved differently there. Only the father had come out unchanged. We shook hands and wished each other a safe trip home, tomorrow for me, next Wednesday for his family. They should enjoy their time in Paris, I said, and he didn't seem to have any doubt that they would. Nothing bad would happen to them, and they wouldn't do anything stupid, either—nothing they wouldn't be able to fix. I waited until they disappeared into the Métro to return my purchases. ♦

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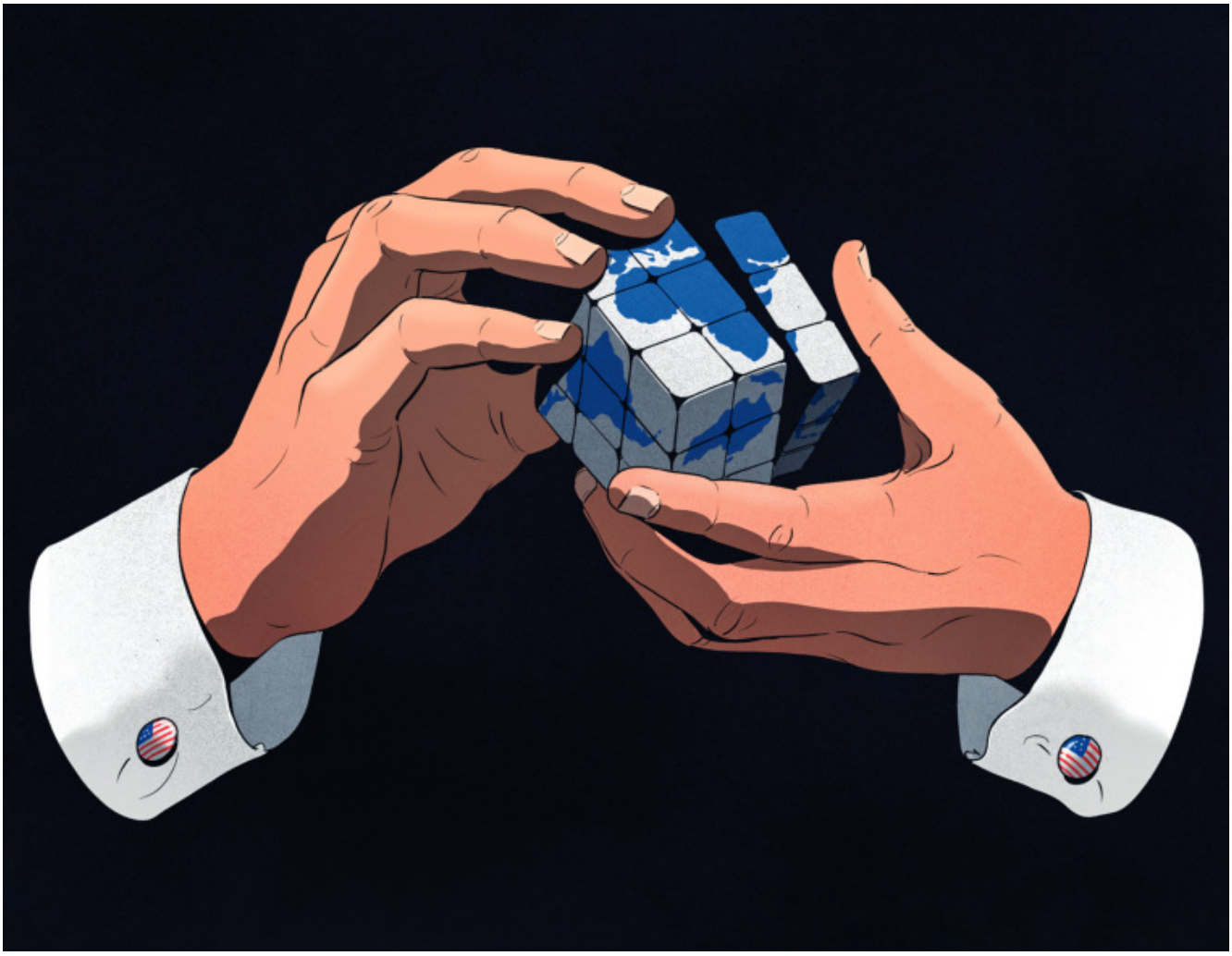


BOOKS

EVERYTHING IN HAND

The C.I.A.'s covert ops have mattered—but not in the way that it hoped.

BY DANIEL IMMERWAHR

Saddam Hussein was known for many qualities, but subtlety was not among them. An oft-repeated anecdote relates that, during a cabinet meeting, he floated the idea of stepping down as Iraq's President, and his minister of health agreed too quickly. Saddam calmly stepped out of the room with him to discuss it and then shot him dead. This is, unsurprisingly, a tall tale. In reality, the health minister was sacked, arrested, tortured, and executed by firing squad.

Saddam employed the same direct approach with his neighbors. In 1980, after Shia protesters killed some Iraqi officials, Saddam executed the country's leading Shia cleric. (The rumor is that he did so personally, hammering a nail into the cleric's head and setting him on fire.) Saddam then invaded Iran, his Shia-led neighbor, starting an eight-year war that killed hundreds of thousands. To pay for that war, Iraq borrowed billions from Kuwait. Saddam wanted the debt forgiven, but the Emir of Kuwait refused, and then Kuwait accelerated oil production during a period of falling prices, pushing Iraq further in the hole. Once again, Saddam launched an invasion. On its first day, August 2, 1990, Iraq's Army

The agency's efforts to control processes that lay beyond its grasp help account for its record of failure.

ILLUSTRATION BY EMMANUEL POLANCO

reached Kuwait's capital and set the Emir's palace aflame. Within the month, Iraq had annexed Kuwait. This resolved the matter of the loan, and gave Saddam control of a hefty percentage of the world's oil supply.

The United States took an occasional interest in oil. And it took a keen interest in Saddam, whose government it had supplied with detailed maps and satellite images during the Iran-Iraq War. Still, U.S. officials were caught flat-footed by the invasion of Kuwait. A few days before it was launched, President George H. W. Bush had sent Saddam a friendly letter that gave no hint that anything was awry.

That was not how things were supposed to go. The men of the C.I.A. idolized the British spy T. E. Lawrence, a.k.a. Lawrence of Arabia. Lawrence had studied archeology, learned languages ("Speak their dialect of Arabic, not yours," he advised his fellow-spies), dressed in "Arab kit," and made powerful friends. The British credited him with guiding the Arab Revolt of 1916-18, which helped to topple the Ottoman Empire, one of Britain's enemies, during the First World War. Whatever his actual contributions to that uprising, he exemplified the deft politicking that deep knowledge allowed.

Few would accuse U.S. intelligence officers of possessing deep knowledge when it came to Iraq. The C.I.A. had no sources close to Saddam, no Lawrences in Baghdad. The agency's best asset was King Hussein of Jordan, who had assured Bush that an invasion of Kuwait was "impossible." Soon afterward came a bigger shock: Saddam had been developing a nuclear arsenal. "Iraq was that close to getting a nuclear weapon," the national-security expert Richard Clarke reflected, and the C.I.A. "hadn't a clue."

It has been tempting to view the C.I.A. as omniscient. Yet "The Achilles Trap" (Penguin Press), Steve Coll's chastening new book about the events leading up to the Iraq War, in 2003, shows that the agency was flying blind. Washington's failure to foresee the Kuwait invasion was just one of what Coll calls a "cascade of errors" that would start several wars and end many lives.

Saddam made miscalculations, too. Their gravity became clear once the U.S.-led coalition entered the Gulf War and vanquished Iraq's military with a thunderous swat. The ground fighting, absurdly one-sided, lasted only a hundred hours. Saddam was cruel, but he was not usually foolish. Couldn't he see what he was up against?

Actually, he couldn't. "Like many people in the Middle East and elsewhere, Saddam thought of the C.I.A. as all-knowing," Coll writes. Saddam assumed that Washington was fully aware of his plans to take Kuwait, and he mistook Bush's lack of objection for tacit permission. Years later, while imprisoned, he confronted a C.I.A. officer about this. "If you didn't want me to go in," the officer recalled Saddam asking, "why didn't you tell me?"

Stories about the C.I.A. typically take one of two forms. The agency is staffed with either malevolent puppet masters or bumbling idiots—"The Bourne Identity" or "Burn After Reading." Both understandings are comforting, albeit in different ways. The first pins all ills on an agency so secretive and sinister that average citizens cannot possibly be held responsible for its actions. The second, which suggests that everything's a farce, offers absolution of another flavor.

"The CIA: An Imperial History" (Basic), an adroit new overview by the historian Hugh Wilford, accepts neither of these characterizations. After the Second World War, the United States set out to direct politics on a global scale. This mission was unpopular, hence the cloak-and-dagger secrecy, and difficult, hence the regular fiascoes. The puppets rarely performed as intended, yet that didn't stop the puppeteers from violently yanking the strings. Many of the C.I.A.'s actions, in Wilford's telling, can be understood as desperate and often destructive attempts to control processes that lay beyond the agency's grasp.

Certainly, the beginning was bumpy. "We knew nothing," the onetime C.I.A. director Richard Helms remembered. Whereas other powerful countries had long invested in foreign espionage—the French can trace their service's origins (with interruptions) to at least Cardinal Richelieu, in the early seventeenth century—America's spying before the Second World War had been sparse and sporadic. In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt formed the Office of Strategic Services to coördinate intelligence, but three years later Harry Truman shuttered it. Then he reconsidered and established the C.I.A., in 1947. The United States was in the strange position of towering over other countries while knowing little about them. "If you came up with a telephone book or a map of an airfield, that was pretty hot stuff," Helms recalled.

To shed light, the C.I.A. sought the brightest bulbs. Ivy League professors were tasked with steering top students toward intelligence careers. Robin Winks, who taught at Yale for many decades, describes the "laying on of hands, quietly and effectively, in the college and in the classroom, at the master's tea and in the seminar, over a cup at Mory's and during a break in crew practice." Interestingly, those hands were often laid on literature students. The agency's longtime director of counterintelligence, James Jesus Angleton, founded two surprisingly good literary journals while at Yale—one featured original work by Ezra Pound, E. E. Cummings, and William Carlos Williams in its first issue. Something about sorting through ambiguity, paradox, and hidden meanings equipped students for espionage.

But to interpret a text you first must have a text, and that is where the Yale crew team was less helpful. When it came to Washington's chief adversary, the Soviet Union, inside information was scant and experts were few. The Cold War strategist George F. Kennan was a fluent Russian speaker who had lived in the U.S.S.R. and was well versed in the culture, but he was a rarity. (Kennan acknowledged that he'd "hit the jackpot as a 'Russian expert.'") Of the C.I.A.'s thirty-eight Soviet analysts in 1948, only twelve knew any Russian.

The C.I.A.'s adventures in Albania, starting in 1949, were a sad illustration of the agency's unsteady footing. Albania was poor, on the edge of the Soviet bloc, and led by a Stalinist dictator, Enver Hoxha. If any socialist state could be toppled, this seemed to be it. The agency's man in charge of covert action, Frank Wisner, envisaged Albania as a "clinical experiment" in rolling back Communism. With the British, the C.I.A. identified figures who might lead a new government, mainly exiled pol-

iticians who'd collaborated with the Axis powers and monarchist dead-enders pining for the return of King Zog.

But orchestrating events in an inaccessible, poorly understood country was, it turned out, hard. Written propaganda foundered in a country that was eighty per cent illiterate, and broadcast propaganda had to contend with a general lack of radios and electricity. The main tactic was to insert dissidents into the country—"pixies," they were called—who would spur revolts like so many Lawrences of Albania. With its strengths in aviation, the C.I.A. thought it wise to air-drop many by parachute.

"They came and we were waiting for them," Hoxha recalled. The C.I.A.'s hastily recruited assets included several informants (joined by the K.G.B. mole Kim Philby, who passed secrets east from a high position within British intelligence), and nearly every airdrop ended catastrophically. In July, 1951, the C.I.A. parachuted in three pixie units: one was wiped out upon landing; the second fled into a house where the members were surrounded and burned alive; and everyone in the last group was either killed or captured and tried. Hoxha's men not only knew of many operations in advance but also forced captured pixies to radio for reinforcements. The C.I.A. "dropped us whatever we dictated to their agents," Hoxha bragged, and the pixies kept coming, for years, "like lambs to the slaughter."

Washington, eager for results but low on options, tried similar tactics elsewhere—with similar outcomes. "All told, hundreds of the CIA's foreign agents were sent to their deaths in Russia, Poland, Romania, Ukraine, and the Baltic states during the 1950s," the journalist Tim Weiner wrote in his classic chronicle "Legacy of Ashes."

From places like Albania, it would be possible to see the C.I.A. as harmlessly ineffectual (or, as Hoxha believed, "completely incompetent"). But intelligence officers quickly shifted their attention to what was then referred to as the Third World, today more often called the Global South. One reason that Wilford sees the C.I.A.'s work as fundamentally imperial is that so much of it took place in former colonies. The stereotype of the Cold War milieu—upturned collars, fog-bathed checkpoints—is misleading on this score. The real action was in warmer climes.

It was the end of colonial empires that made the Global South central. Each newly independent state, from Washington's vantage, represented a chance to gain (or lose) influence. Of course, countries that had just thrown off empires bristled at outside attempts to guide them. Ironically, Wilford points out, this anti-imperialism empowered the C.I.A. The stronger the norm against meddling, the more U.S. leaders felt a need to hide their work. The C.I.A. thus became a new covert force of empire in an age of decolonization, Wilford argues. And, in that context, its work was of enormous consequence.

To say that the C.I.A. was consequential, however, is not to say that it was in control. The expertise shortage it faced in Eastern Europe was an outright drought in regions elsewhere. The U.S. lacked the generations-deep, place-based colonial knowledge that Britain and France had. Missionaries helped, but only so much. A survey of academic expertise on Japan conducted in 1935—when the United States was edging toward war with the country—found that the sole chair of Japanese studies in the U.S. was held by a professor at Stanford who could neither read nor speak Japanese.

Wilford notes how U.S. intelligence officers initially clung to more experienced Europeans. Stationed in unfamiliar environments, they tended to adopt the life styles of the departing colonizers: educating their children at European schools, staffing their colonial villas with native servants, playing polo. To European eyes, such men were less puppet masters than naïfs. The English novelist Graham Greene channelled that view in "The Quiet American" (1955), in which a world-weary Brit watches an idealistic C.I.A. officer, Alden Pyle, bumble his way through Vietnam.

Many assumed (incorrectly) that Pyle was based on the covert-operations legend Edward Lansdale. Journalists called Lansdale the Lawrence of Asia, but that was a stretch, as Wilford makes clear. Lawrence believed in living somewhere long enough to melt into it, and he was enough of a Method actor that he wore Arab dress among Europeans. Lansdale, in contrast, hopped borders dilettantishly, meddling in Philippine, Cuban, and Vietnamese affairs. He hadn't been on assignment in Vietnam a month before arriving uninvited at the governmental palace with "some notes on how to be a Prime Minister of Vietnam" for Ngo Dinh Diem (notes derived, hilariously, from Lansdale's "time out among Vietnamese"). Here was a man who, though he spoke little French and no Vietnamese, was happy to American-splain South Vietnam to its Prime Minister. The absurdity

"He's not the rightful king, but you have to admit he's pretty cool."

heightened when Lansdale, concerned that Diem wasn't following, called for a translator.

Diem knew English. In fact, he'd recently worked for the political-science department at Michigan State University (and later returned to East Lansing to collect an honorary doctorate). The Lawrencian fantasy was that U.S. agents would embed themselves in foreign lands. In reality, it went the other way, with ambitious foreigners infiltrating the United States. The list of world leaders who trained Stateside includes South Korea's Syngman Rhee (Princeton), Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah (Lincoln), Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto (Harvard), Japan's Shinzo Abe (U.S.C.), the U.N. Secretaries-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali (Columbia) and Kofi Annan (Macalester), and Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu (M.I.T., not to mention Cheltenham High School, in Pennsylvania). The leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Army during the Second Sudanese Civil War, John Garang, had a bachelor's from Grinnell and a doctorate in agricultural economics from Iowa State. Even Saddam Hussein was an honorary citizen of Detroit, having been given the key to the city after generously supporting one of its churches, in 1979.

When the C.I.A. sought to oust the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini, its preferred replacement—the man whose picture hung on the wall of the Iran Division accompanied by the words "The Hope of Democracy of Iran"—was Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi. Conveniently, he had studied at Williams College and trained at Reese Air Force Base, in Lubbock, Texas. ("They adopted me as one of their own," he recalled.) Even more conveniently, Pahlavi lived in a McMansion near Great Falls, Virginia, some ten minutes from the C.I.A.'s headquarters, in Langley.

Langley latched on to such men, even more than it latched on to seasoned European officials. These obliging foreigners—with their church donations and U.S. diplomas—offered a tidy solution to the problem of managing a complex world. The quest for control could be the search for "our man": that luminous being who would set everything right. The C.I.A. interfered constantly in foreign politics, but its typical mode wasn't micromanaging; it was subcontracting.

In a narrow sense, this worked. The agency made little headway in politically frozen (and nuclearly defended) Eastern Europe, but in the fluid Third World it was on a streak. The political scientist Lindsey A. O'Rourke, in her 2018 book, "Covert Regime Change," conservatively tallies fifty-four Cold War campaigns to oust a government or tilt an election outside Europe, twenty-four of which succeeded. One might ask whether the C.I.A. deserved credit or merely backed the sides that would have won regardless. Either way, the map was sprinkled with tiny blue stars—Iran, Guatemala, Chile—marking U.S. victories.

It was in pursuit of another such star that U.S. politicians and intelligence officers fastened on to an Iraqi exile named Ahmad Chalabi. He was an archetypal "our man": British boarding school, time at M.I.T., a mathematics Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, and yet plausible as Iraq's next leader. To Republicans hungry for regime change, he was irresistible. At George W. Bush's 2004 State of the Union address, Chalabi was seated directly behind the First Lady.

But who was zooming who? "I saw *them* as an asset," he later explained, "that I could use to promote my program."

Washington promoted Chalabi's program vigorously. Between 1992 and 2003, his opposition group took in more than a hundred million dollars from the C.I.A. and other agencies. Suitcases of cash—at times accompanied by weapons and training—meant much in the resource-starved Third World. Political aspirants who received the agency's blessing got help in seizing control and, equally important, help in holding it. Winning the C.I.A.'s primary was a crucial step on the road to power.

But candidates who won the C.I.A.'s primary often struggled in the general election. Diem may have been the "miracle man of Vietnam," as *Life* called him, but he was a Catholic in a Buddhist country, and the things that helped him in Washington hurt him in Saigon.

The C.I.A.'s aims were rarely popular, and its meddling was detested. The politicians who got the agency's support suffered politically for their association with it. Many squared the circle by ruling as dictators. Washington tolerated this, perhaps even preferred it. "It is better to have a strong regime in power than a liberal government if it is indulgent and relaxed and penetrated by communists," Kennan counselled about Latin America. For all the heady talk of promoting democracy, more than two-thirds of U.S. covert interventions during the Cold War were in support of authoritarian regimes, O'Rourke has found.

The strongmen walked a fine line. Defer to Washington and they'd face revolts; defy it and they'd be cut off or, worse, cut down. Diem held on, vexing both his patrons and his constituents, until 1963, when he was killed in a coup. The plotters had reviewed their plans (though seemingly not the "murdering Diem" part) with the Kennedy Administration, and they acted securely in the knowledge that U.S. aid would keep flowing. To Washington, if one subcontractor didn't suit, another might. "Nothing succeeds like successors," the diplomat and economist John Kenneth Galbraith remarked.

It was sorely tempting to clear those successors' paths with assassinations. U.S.

"These are my blurbs."

agents never directly killed a head of state. But Luca Trenta's new history, "The President's Kill List" (Edinburgh), identifies at least five countries whose leaders U.S. officials schemed to kill (the Soviet Union, Cuba, the Republic of the Congo, Libya, Iraq) and at least two others where Washington's local allies carried out the act (the Dominican Republic, South Vietnam). Trenta also describes a nebulous plot to "biologically immobilise" Indonesia's President, whatever that meant. On November 22, 1963, the day John F. Kennedy was assassinated—and at nearly the precise moment—a C.I.A. officer was passing a disaffected Cuban official a ballpoint pen rigged with a hypodermic needle, for use in murdering Fidel Castro.

In 1975, an investigation led by Senator Frank Church exposed this and many of the C.I.A.'s other machinations. "Fear blinds us," Church had warned. "Fear of a future that we cannot shape with our own hands." As if to underscore how far into the murky depths this fear had driven the country, three of the Church Committee's witnesses turned up dead—one shot right before his testimony, one killed by a car bomb, and one found dismembered in a barrel.

Wilford stresses the "boomerang effects" of the C.I.A.'s work: the violence brought home. But that was only a taste of the mayhem wrought abroad. The coup that killed Diem was followed by four more in South Vietnam over the next two years. This was not unusual, O'Rourke found in surveying the aftermath of U.S. Cold War interventions. More than half the leaders covertly installed were subsequently either assassinated or ousted in a revolution or a coup. A regime-change attempt, moreover, raised the odds that the targeted state would clash with the U.S., experience a civil war, or stage a mass killing. Washington's interference was not only counterproductive, O'Rourke writes; it also had "disastrous consequences" for the people caught in its wake.

Catastrophic regime changes didn't end with the Cold War. As the nineties wore on, U.S. leaders grew increasingly alarmed about Saddam's continued military capacities. But intelligence was wanting. ("Zero, nada, in terms of agents on the ground," one C.I.A. officer recalled.) The combination of scant knowledge and overweening concern created demand, and Chalabi mobilized his network to arrange the supply. He promoted sources who claimed that Saddam was stockpiling chemical and biological weapons and had kept working toward nuclear ones.

Saddam, in fact, had destroyed his chemical and biological arsenals and ended his nuclear program after the Gulf War. Yet "he assumed that an all-powerful C.I.A. *already knew* that he had no nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons," Steve Coll writes, and so he concluded that foreign inspections must be part of a coup plot. Washington, meanwhile, listened intently to Chalabi's warnings. "In a capital where knowledge of Baathist Iraq ran very thin," Coll continues, "Chalabi got away with his posturing, even though he had no demonstrated following inside Iraq" and "no experience in Iraq's military or government."

"The U.S.A. is the strongest state," Saddam reflected. "But it is not the most capable."

Saddam saw spies around every corner. This was reasonable, given the C.I.A.'s history, but Coll shows that it was exactly the wrong fear. U.S. intelligence had missed Saddam's Kuwait-invasion preparations, his nuclear program, and his subsequent disarmament. His real problem was not what the C.I.A. knew but what it didn't.

Decrying Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction, the United States invaded in 2003. It chased out Saddam and established a new governing council, to which it appointed Chalabi. Yet in early 2004 a poll in Iraq revealed that Washington's favorite Iraqi was the country's least trusted public figure—trusted even less than Saddam. The next year, in the first post-Saddam election, Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress won a pitiful 0.25 per cent of the vote.

U.S. planners had banked on a "Wizard of Oz moment," as one occupation official put it: the Wicked Witch vanquished, order restored. No such luck. Estimates of how many Iraqis died in the ensuing turmoil vary, but it was certainly in the hundreds of thousands. Iraq was strategically important to the United States, yet from 1990 on U.S. leaders had been essentially clueless about it.

Would more information have helped? No doubt, and Coll's book illustrates the costs of ignorance magnificently. It may be consoling, then, that the twenty-first century has been a golden age of data mining. Intelligence officers, who once subsisted on trickles of information, are now drinking from the fire hose. The C.I.A. today is only a piece of what Wilford calls "the sprawling intelligence-industrial complex"; roughly two million individuals have access to classified information.

Wilford struggles to see this as an improvement, however. The C.I.A.'s trail of havoc, he feels, stems not from the ineptitude of its officers but from the audacity of its mission. Superintending global politics is a vast undertaking, requiring both a deep understanding of many places and the sort of hubris that makes that deep understanding difficult. And, because Washington has been insulated from the worst consequences of its mistakes, it has rarely been forced to learn from them. In the end, the C.I.A. has the power to break things, but not the skill to build them.

A reformed C.I.A. (slogan: "Coup Better") wouldn't solve the problem that Wilford raises. The heart of the issue is the United States' determination to control global affairs. This is not a secret desire but a point of pride. Joe Biden has spoken of the need for the U.S. to remain at the "head of the table." One can argue about whether the United States has led well, or whether others would do worse. But a clear-eyed reckoning must acknowledge that "leadership" never meant just bold ideas and stern resolve. It also meant scheming generals, poison vials, and Albanians parachuting to certain death.

In December, 2006, it meant guards in black ski masks, marching Saddam Hussein into a foul-smelling room with a noose attached to the ceiling. Men chanted the name Moqtada al-Sadr, an influential cleric and militia leader who had staged attacks on U.S. forces. "Go to Hell," they told Saddam. "The Hell that is Iraq?" he asked. With the noose on, Saddam started praying. Midway through, a trapdoor opened beneath him, and his neck snapped. ♦

MOVE IN FOR THE CULL

The complicated calculus of killing some wild creatures to protect others.

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

We've upset the balance between predator and prey. Should we try to right it?

The northern spotted owl is about a foot and a half high, with very dark eyes, a greenish beak, and a rim of feathers, called a facial disk, that makes it appear to be regarding the world with worried perplexity. Like most owls, northern spotteds are nocturnal, but, unlike most of their brethren, they are picky. They can live only in old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest. Their diet is restricted and seems to consist mainly of flying squirrels. They're incapable of building nests of their own, and so, to raise their young, they rely on tree cavities or on basketlike growths that are produced by arboreal infections and known, evocatively, as witches' brooms.

The spotted owl's fastidiousness produced one of the great environmental conflicts of the twentieth century. By the late nineteen-eighties, it was estimated that only fifteen hundred breeding pairs survived. Since the owls depended on old growth, the only way to save them, according to biologists, was to preserve the Northwest's remaining stands of ancient trees. The timber industry countered that leaving those trees untouched would cost thousands of jobs. The two sides adopted increasingly confrontational tactics. Loggers raced to cut down the most valuable timber before their opponents could secure court injunctions. Protesters blocked forest-access roads and chained themselves to tree trunks. The police brought in heavy machinery to bulldoze their encampments. Environmentalists dressed up as owls and shouted, "No more clear-cuts!" Sawmill workers drove around with bumper stickers that read "I Like Spotted Owls . . . Fried."

Eventually, the birds—or their non-avian champions—won what came to be known as the "timber wars." In 1994, the Clinton Administration set aside some 24.5 million acres of forest to protect the owls. But the victory has proved a hollow one: northern spotted owls have continued to decline. A few years ago, a team of scientists analyzed data from eleven study sites in Oregon, California, and Washington State. They found that, since 1995, the number of spotted owls at the sites had fallen by at least fifty per cent. At some sites, it had dropped by more than sixty per cent.

These figures have set off a new conflict, what might be thought of as the "timbre wars." Researchers believe that what's now standing in the way of the spotted owl's recovery is another owl, the barred owl. The barred owl's haunting call—often rendered as "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?"—is commonly heard in the Eastern United States and Canada. (Spotted owls have a higher-pitched, four-beat call.) The ranges of the two species should not overlap. But, during the past several decades, almost certainly owing to the human transformation of the landscape, barred owls have pushed west. Far less finicky than their spotted kin, they're also bigger and more territorial. Barred owls compete with spotted owls for prey and nesting sites, sometimes killing them outright.

Last fall, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed a plan to try to save the northern spotted owl by eliminating tens of thousands of its competitors. The idea is to lure barred owls into the open by playing digital recordings of their calls. Then "removal specialists" are to pop them, using a "shotgun of 20 gauge or larger bore."

The slaughter of animals is, of course, routine. Every day, around the world, some nine hundred thousand cows, more than a million goats, and nearly four million pigs are "processed" into meat. Roughly a hundred million lab rats and mice are dispatched each year in the U.S. alone. Countless other rodents are trapped or poisoned because they're seen as pests.

Compared with this carnage, Fish

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GETTY

ILLUSTRATION BY JAVIER JAÉN

and Wildlife's plan might be considered a mere drop in the abattoir. And yet the proposal raises its own set of concerns. As a rule, people don't interfere with predation. When a lion in the wild takes down a wildebeest, it's considered fair game. But where can you—or a lion—go these days that's genuinely wild? If people, either intentionally or accidentally, have tilted the game to favor one species over another, do people then have an obligation to undo the damage? Or does that just compound the problem?

Hugh Warwick is a British ecologist and writer. In "Cull of the Wild: Killing in the Name of Conservation" (Bloomsbury), he considers a dozen recent campaigns to assist one species by "removing" another. These include efforts to cull gray squirrels in favor of red squirrels, mice in favor of albatrosses, rats in favor of puffins, and pythons in favor of bobcats. As Warwick makes clear, there are many more examples where these came from. Invasive species, he points out, are among the main drivers of extinction today, up there with habitat destruction, pollution, and climate change.

Warwick's attachment to animals runs deep. "My earliest memories had me tied to animals more than people," he writes. He stopped eating meat thirty-five years ago and generally avoids animal products, although, he confesses, he sometimes makes an exception for cake. Warwick's particular passion is hedgehogs. He lectures about hedgehogs, serves as the spokesman for Britain's Hedgehog Preservation Society, sports a tattoo of a hedgehog, and performs hedgehog-related standup comedy. (There are, alas, no hedgehog jokes in "Cull of the Wild.")

In their native habitat, which stretches from Italy to Scandinavia, European hedgehogs are in trouble. It's estimated that in Britain their population has dropped by half just since the year 2000. And yet hedgehogs also pose a threat. They are generalists that will eat just about anything, from slugs and millipedes to dog food, and, when introduced into a new ecosystem, they can wreak havoc. Think "The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle" crossed with "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

The Uists, a group of islands in Scotland's Outer Hebrides, are an important breeding ground for several species of wading birds, including ringed plovers. In the nineteen-seventies, someone deliberately imported hedgehogs to the islands. As they multiplied and spread, the hedgehogs developed a taste for the eggs and chicks of wading birds. By 2003, the Uists' avian populations were crashing, and the Scottish government, in concert with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, decided that something would have to be done about this. The something that they settled on was trapping hedgehogs and killing them via lethal injection.

Many in Britain opposed the plan, including Warwick. He joined a group called Uist Hedgehog Rescue, whose goal was to round up the islands' hogs and ferry the captives to the mainland, where they could be released. (Brian May, best known as the lead guitarist for Queen, helped to finance the effort, and Tim Rice, best known as the lyricist for "The Lion King," offered his estate in Scotland as a refuge.) But the relocations and lethal injections made little difference. After a decade, hog numbers on all but one of the Uists were just as high as before, and the whole effort was abandoned. "Removing all the hedgehogs from the Uists is pretty much impossible," Warwick concludes.

From this story, one might imagine Warwick to be opposed to "killing in the name of conservation." In fact, though, he's conflicted. Conservation "is *really* complicated," he writes. "There is an old saying that anyone who gives you a simple answer to a complicated problem is either a liar or a fool." In the case of culling, even the complications are complicated. Some are ethical, some are practical, some are emotional, and some are a combination of all three.

Consider the water vole. Native to Europe and western Asia, water voles look a bit like overgrown hamsters. They live in holes dug into riverbanks, and they will, when threatened, plop into the water to retreat to their burrows.

Water voles have a lot of enemies but none as effective as American minks, which were imported to Britain for fur farming. Some farmed minks got loose; others were let loose by animal-rights activists. Because minks, too, are excellent swimmers, they can pursue voles into their homes. Nowadays, minks are widespread in Britain and voles are scarce; the water vole has the unenviable distinction of being the country's fastest-declining mammalian species. Warwick confesses that he has a "soft spot" for water voles, which he describes as mini-beavers.

At one point, Warwick pays a visit to Tony Martin, the chair of a group called the Waterlife Recovery Trust. The group's goal is to eliminate Britain's minks entirely. This is a much bigger challenge than ousting the hedgehogs from the Uists, but Warwick finds himself impressed by Martin's battle plan, which includes the use of electronic traps that send a text message when an animal has been caught. The traps, known as remote monitoring devices, are, according to Martin, "game changers," as volunteers no longer have to check them constantly.

"I can't stress enough, these are glorious creatures," Martin says of the mink. "It is just that they are the wrong animal in the wrong place at the wrong time. . . . We humans made a mistake by introducing them to this country, and it's a mistake which we can and should rectify."

Later, Warwick speaks to Marc Bekoff, a professor emeritus at the University of Colorado Boulder. Bekoff, an advocate of what's become known as "compassionate conservation," argues that one mistake doesn't justify another. "Mostly we kill to make ourselves feel better, to feel like we have tried to clear up a mess of our making," he tells Warwick.

"We think we have the right to intervene—but human exceptionalism is not something I want to be part of," Bekoff says. "And, if you take the time to look at our interventions, we have not been doing a great job of it."

Of all the nations in the world, none is more devoted to killing in the name of conservation than New Zealand. This is mostly due to geography. New Zealand was the last major landmass to be settled, and when the Māori first showed up, around 1300, it had no terrestrial mammals except for a few species of bat. As a result, its native animals, which included giant insects, fantastic

birds, and the last remaining species in an order of reptiles that crept among the dinosaurs, were mostly defenseless against furry interlopers. The Māori brought with them Pacific rats, which caused, or at least contributed to, the extinction of dozens of species, including the long-billed wren, the South Island snipe, and the Aurora frog.

When the British arrived, in the late eighteenth century, they brought along more rats—ship rats and Norway rats. Then the colonists began importing European species that they missed having around—deer, hedgehogs, rabbits. The rabbits reproduced so prolifically that, according to the country's government, they "reached plague proportions." In an attempt to reduce the leporine population, New Zealanders next imported stoats and ferrets. Many of the purposeful introductions have proved just as disastrous as the accidental ones. In 2016, New Zealand officially launched a campaign to rid itself of introduced predators. The main targets are stoats, possums, and rats, but feral cats and hedgehogs are also on the list. A blog post I once came across supporting the work of eradication was titled "Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle, Serial Killer."

Laura McLauchlan, the author of "Hedgehogs, Killing, and Kindness: The Contradictions of Care in Conservation Practice" (M.I.T.), is an anthropologist who grew up in New Zealand. Her work focusses on the complex ties between humans and other species. Just as the predator-free campaign was getting under way, she moved to England to immerse herself in the culture of hedgehog enthusiasts. (Warwick makes several appearances in her book.)

McLauchlan settles in Bristol, about a hundred miles west of London. She volunteers at Prickles Hedgehog Rescue, a rehabilitation center in the nearby village of Cheddar, and interviews hedgehog "champions" who are working to make their gardens and communities more hospitable to hogs. The creatures hibernate in the winter, so some gardeners put out boxes for them to curl up in. Others leave out rotting logs, which attract the sorts of insects that they like to eat. Still others cut holes in their fences to aid hedgehogs in their nocturnal wanderings. McLauchlan tries to persuade one of her neighbors to forgo repairs to a crumbling garden wall, so that hedgehogs can scrabble over it. He ignores her.

After a year or so, McLauchlan heads back to New Zealand, arriving in Wellington just in time for an annual event called Pest-Fest. (By this point, she has developed ringworm, probably from handling an infected hedgehog.) Visitors to Pest-Fest are encouraged to become wildlife champions of a distinctly unsentimental variety; instead of comfy boxes, they are urged to put out spring traps. McLauchlan is so upset by the festival's gung-ho attitude toward killing that she breaks down in tears.

Wellington turns out to be at the bleeding edge of the predator-free campaign. Thanks to lots of trapping and poisoning, several rare birds can now be seen fluttering around the city, including kākā (large bronze-colored parrots) and tūī (boisterous blue-and-green honeyeaters). McLauchlan expresses "gratitude" toward those who have worked to keep species like these around, and says that she "might also choose culling" when the alternative is the loss of such magnificent creatures. But she continues to be disturbed by the portrayal of those species labelled pests, which she sees as the bestial equivalent of dehumanization. "*How* the other is made present to us, through which stories and technologies they are mediated, matters deeply," she writes. And she can't—or won't—give up on hedgehogs. When she comes upon one and then another that seem to be ailing, she takes them in, fattens them up, and releases them, even though she knows they're on the city's enemies list. Then she worries that she's saved the hogs only long enough for them to toddle into the nearest trap.

McLauchlan's feelings are central to "Hedgehogs, Killing, and Kindness." Though we may view our attitudes toward nature as natural, really, she argues, they are socially constructed. (There's nothing either good or bad about hedgehogs, but thinking makes it so.) She spends a lot of time trying to sort out the tangle of her emotions but comes to believe there's no consistent way through them. Ambivalence, she eventually decides, can be productive: "What becomes possible, and what might become generously contagious, when we are able to

"How many years until we become people with a mind-set left over from another era?"

hold our and others' attachments with care—even when they don't (yet) make sense to us, and even when they might appear opposed to our own?"

As it happens, right around the time that McLauchlan left New Zealand, I went there to report on the predator-free campaign. One day, I visited a couple who owned a beautiful farm north of Auckland. Out of fondness for such creatures as kiwis, they had dotted their farm with traps, some powerful enough to kill a cat, and periodically they had to make the rounds to empty and reset them. (Kiwi, which are flightless, nest in burrows, making them highly vulnerable to mammalian predators.) On the day of my visit, one of the first traps checked contained a stoat that had evidently been dead for some time. The stoat was writhing, as if possessed by some zombie-like force. When the husband poked at it, it split apart to reveal a mass of maggots.

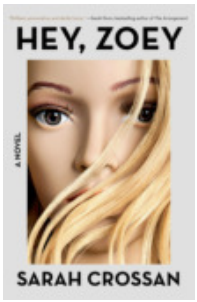
There's no doubt that predator elimination, or culling, or killing in the name of conservation, or whatever you want to call it, is ugly work. And it's no less disturbing for being well intentioned. As Desdemona observes, shortly before she is suffocated, "That death's unnatural that kills for loving."

But the question, which is the question that confronts U.S. Fish and Wildlife and New Zealand's Department of Conservation and the many groups working to protect wading birds and water voles and kākā and spotted owls, is: What's the alternative? In many cases, it's just a different kind of death—the demise of a species, which, inevitably, is preceded by the demise of individuals.

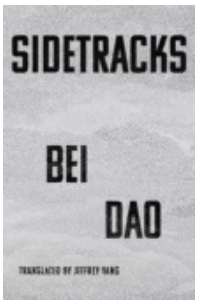
"I would love there to be a way of fixing the messes we have made that did not rely on such lethal action," Warwick writes. But the "desire to take killing off the table will not take death off the table." People can shoot barred owls or let barred owls do in spotted ones. Either way, we're implicated.

As Warwick observes, it's far too late to debate whether humans have a right to intervene in the natural world, because "we have, as a species, already intervened." This is the bind we're in, and, unfortunately, there is no bloodless way out of it. ♦

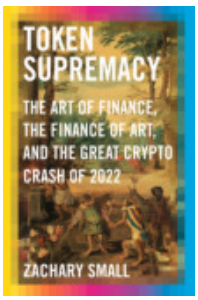
BRIEFLY NOTED



Hey, Zoey, *by Sarah Crossan (Little, Brown)*. What, in our digital age, constitutes an affair? Texting? Swiping? How about buying an eight-thousand-dollar A.I. sex doll and hiding it from your wife in the garage? In this entertaining novel, the middle-aged narrator, Dolores, discovers that her husband has done just that. As Dolores's marriage falls apart, she forms a strange bond with the doll, Zoey, who proves a better listener than her aloof husband (an aptly professioned anesthesiologist). Told in short scenes that crosscut the present with childhood memories, the story is as much about technology as it is about friendship and romance. Even if Zoey's "aliveness" is "a ruse," like that of an E. T. A. Hoffmann character, she offers Dolores both life-affirming companionship and a way to access her repressed soul.



Sidetracks, *by Bei Dao, translated from the Chinese by Jeffrey Yang (New Directions)*. More than a decade in the making, this book-length poem traces its acclaimed author's years in exile after his expulsion from mainland China in the wake of the Tiananmen Square protests. Dotted with dates and locations of personal and historical significance—as well as encounters with friends and peers, such as Allen Ginsberg and Mahmoud Darwish—the poem combines the documentary and the elusive, finding meaning in language both when it "talks with the tanks" and when it captures the "sunshine tablecloth" in a California kitchen. Elegantly rendered into English, the poem exemplifies Bei Dao's surprising imagery and logic while also introducing an autobiographical immediacy to his work.



Token Supremacy, *by Zachary Small (Knopf)*. In this gimlet-eyed chronicle, a *Times* journalist traces the market for art in the form of non-fungible tokens (N.F.T.s)—digital commodities stored and traded on the blockchain. As the value of the crypto market hit a peak of nearly three trillion dollars, in late 2021, the prices of N.F.T. art works rose along with it. In February of that year, "Everydays"—a series of "crass products of a mind feeding on internet bile," by the artist Beeple—sold for nearly seventy million dollars at a Christie's auction. But soon the technology was shown to be flawed, and the market shrank. Though uneven, the book is an alternately amusing and disturbing document of the personalities driving this strange chapter in the long history of art's financialization.

Committed, *by Suzanne Scanlon (Vintage)*. "My writing was fuelled by desperation, and madness, too," Scanlon, a novelist, writes in this affecting memoir, which recounts her stay at the New York State Psychiatric Institute in her early twenties, following a suicide attempt. Dogged by a "preternatural sense of doom" after her mother's death from cancer, she is solaced by the work of women writers, including Marguerite Duras and Sylvia Plath, who wrote their way through despair, and Audre Lorde, whose "Cancer Journals" feel like a "revelation." If the hospital ward where Scanlon stayed felt at times like a "foreign country," books served as a ballast for her fragile psyche.

SICK, SAD WORLD

What COVID did to fiction.

BY KATY WALDMAN

In the early, self-improvement phase of the pandemic, people would sometimes comment on the opportunities that lockdown presented for art and artists. They'd observe that Shakespeare wrote "King Lear" during plague times, or that Tony Kushner and Larry Kramer snatched inspiration from the AIDS crisis. It was the slenderest of silver linings, jumbled up with terror and frustration—the idea that COVID might, if nothing else, produce enduring fiction.

Were the "Lear" people right? Four years after the virus began its worldwide demolition tour, the efforts of contemporary scribes of pestilence have borne fruit. A heterogeneous body of literature now attempts to catch the import of the period from roughly March, 2020, to the end of 2021. Authors have written erudite tragicomedies ("Our Country Friends," by Gary Shteyngart), gentle ghost stories ("The Sentence," by Louise Erdrich), and shape-shifting compendiums of feeling and memory ("The Vulnerables," by Sigrid Nunez). The books are intimate and domestic ("Day," by Michael Cunningham), poetic and psychoanalytic ("August Blue," by Deborah Levy), stricken and timid ("The Limits," by Nell Freudenberger), stylized and swaggering ("Blue Ruin," by Hari Kunzru).

But, despite this polyphony of approaches, a single note seems to sound throughout—a tone of pummelling topicality, all sweaty masks and bottles of disinfectant, reverent about suffering and critical of the comfortable. From a distance, characters behold a world "on fire," with "its systems collapsing" (Nunez). The rich live "in big houses, on high floors," while, for everyone else, "history did not stop . . . but came howling on" (Kunzru). We meet President "orangey" (Erdrich) and President "ABOMINATION" (Freudenberger); we hear about how Democrats "weren't going to beat the red hats by sounding like grad students at a bar" (Freudenberger again). In the stores are "devastated shelves, a couple of fights breaking out over paper towels" (Erdrich). Some lines run together like "the sirens that have become so familiar and will always haunt the memories of those who were at the pandemic's epicenter" (Nunez). In Levy's book, "a fleet of seven ambulances with sirens blaring raced by." In Freudenberger's, "ambulances screamed by, one after the other."

Often, this ripped-from-the-headlines note rings alongside others, in books that are agile as novels, with vivid characters and plots, but more leaden as documents of a particular moment. The stretches of writing most concerned with the pandemic can feel unreal, or can seem to regurgitate the past rather than illuminate it, with phrases buckling under the freshly smarting facts that they are asked to grapple with. Consider a handful of glancing references to George Floyd's murder. In "The Sentence," characters watch "the video of a police officer with his knee on the neck of a Black man who cried out and cried out for his mother and then went quiet." In "Our Country Friends," characters stare at the video of "the white policeman . . . draining the air from his Black victim's lungs with his knee." I was returned to the moment, in "Leaving the Atocha Station," when Ben Lerner's narrator worries that he is "incapable of having a profound experience of art." The closest he's come, he says, is "the experience of distance, a profound experience of the absence of profundity."

What accounts for this gulf, this

Radiating from this body of work is a desire to be useful, somehow.

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN HICKEY

profound anti-profundity? The realities of the pandemic—nearly fifteen million deaths worldwide; spiking rates of domestic violence, drug abuse, and job loss; plummeting mental health—amounted to a seismic, totalizing emergency. But for many people the day-to-day experience was uneventful: walk in endless circles around the block, retreat from strangers, update loved ones via glitchy, lonely FaceTimes from bed. Some of the numbness of the time, flowing from either boredom or despair, has dripped onto the page, and may explain why these novels at times transcribe to the point of avoidance, obscuring the meanings of things with careful accounts of what they looked or sounded like.

But this body of work also radiates a desire to be useful, somehow, and a sense that perhaps fiction can give people a new way of thinking about the crisis. A number of the books circle the question of what to do with unprocessed grief and pain. Is it safer to give it a hearing or to send it away, riskier to skim over it too quickly or to linger in it too long? Few authors want to posit an airbrushed world in which tense housing situations always work out and ECMO patients always survive. At the same time, their books seem suffused with anxiety about sinking too deeply into the traumatic past. These works dutifully convey the facts of lockdown, yet they come most alive in side plots involving love and manners, the arts, or characters' tussles with identity. The result is a class of novels about the need for memory which display symptoms of denial themselves. When the books turn to the pandemic directly, they struggle—some successfully, some not—to truthfully represent a period whose historical meaning has not yet come to rest.

One of the best works of fiction to come out of the pandemic was also one of the first: "Our Country Friends," by Gary Shteyngart, which arrived in the fall of 2021. (Maybe, for COVID novels, if not COVID itself, a short incubation period is a good sign.) Shteyngart tapped into what would emerge as the dominant themes of the burgeoning genre: privilege, the refusal of reality, the defensive structures that people erect to keep out the truth. As the book opens, an author named Sasha invites a group of friends and celebrities to shelter with him in a "Dacha" whose rustic-chic style pays homage to "a tidy European village, the kind that would never have welcomed his ancestors." The Dacha is a hub of nostalgic fantasy, its grounds a figure for false innocence—which is to say, for repression. Shteyngart draws parallels between his characters and the vain, delusional aristocrats of earlier centuries. The splendor of the estate is rotten, threaded with violence: we see Sasha bellow at a local handyman, while racist bumper stickers and cryptic advertisements for an organization called the Patriotic Defense League hint at the resentment of poorer neighbors. COVID seeks out the cracks in the camp's Edenic façade, eventually finding a victim within the visitors' seemingly charmed world.

Despite its sharp critiques, the book is not overly ruminative; it doesn't molder in sorrow. With a zany, speculative dating app, high farce, and sneaky poignancy, it is recognizably the work of its author, who seems to have slapped on a mask one March morning in 2020 and barely broken his stride.

Not all of the novels find the same success. In "The Limits," Nell Freudenberger evinces a similar interest in the idle rich, yet she lacks Shteyngart's satirical edge. Where his novel offers a relatively sophisticated take on inequality—that hidden darkness always rises to the surface—hers devolves into a cringey apology. A pregnant woman named Kate must make peace with her stepdaughter, Pia, who has just come to live with her and her husband, Stephen. Preoccupied with remote schooling and the intricacies of child care, the book gets lost in the defense mechanisms that it seeks to depict, reflecting the restrictions of a tedious, lonely, and confining era in American life. It languishes in affluent settings—a gleaming Manhattan apartment, a second home in Amagansett—attending to how characters distract, soothe, or re-center themselves. Freudenberger asks what happens when structure falls away from people's days. They busy their minds with minutiae, she answers, and with stakes constructed from scraps and shadows—can a foreign babysitter be trusted to enforce mask-wearing among her charges? But, instead of organically exploring this psychological tendency and its consequences, the novel tries to correct for them, via clunky, schematic story lines involving less fortunate characters. Kate teaches at a public high school whose students are largely from lower-income families. Several chapters unfold from the perspective of Athyna, a Black twelfth grader, who is overwhelmed by college applications, caretaking duties (she is largely responsible for raising her four-year-old nephew), and clinical anxiety. Freudenberger gives Athyna a cursory arc—heart of gold, sexual assault, scholarship to college—but she is most attuned to the cross-cultural sensitivities informing Athyna's encounters with Kate and Pia, who are white.

The book lionizes essential workers with an equally heavy hand. Stephen is a cardiologist putting in ever-lengthening days at the hospital; passages in which he is tormented by memories of COVID patients he couldn't save feel like the literary equivalent of the pandemic ritual of banging pots and pans together. Between the book's piety toward its nonwhite characters and its paeans to intrepid doctors and teachers, one has the claustrophobic impression of being trapped in Freudenberger's own shame spiral.

Throughout the literature of the pandemic, there is a persistent guilty conscience about having the space and time to write a pandemic novel. It's no accident that the spectre of the gadabout writer looms large. Sasha, in "Our Country Friends," cuts a ridiculous figure, and, in keeping with the 2020 mood of authorial self-flagellation, he boasts a résumé that mirrors Shteyngart's own. The narrator of Sigrid Nunez's "The Vulnerables," a novelist, suffers from writer's block, not least because she has developed a sudden disgust with her job: "Images of harrowed health care workers made it hard to see inventing stories about made-up people as a heroic profession," she says. Instead of

writing, she looks after a friend's parrot and monitors the virus's death toll—she's too anxious to craft imaginary worlds and too ashamed to allow herself the luxury of escape.

For Nunez, the guilt around writing seems to conceal anxiety, a panic at the notion of having a chance to do one's part, if only as a novelist, and blowing it. She and Shteyngart gesture toward social reckoning in part to return to the question of literary reckoning: How should one write about the pandemic? Unlike "Our Country Friends," "The Vulnerables" enacts a conflict between two possible modes, rosy uplift and depressing realism. When Nunez's narrator moves into an apartment in lower Manhattan, she discovers, to her dismay, that she has acquired a housemate—Vetch, a college dropout with behavioral issues. But she needn't have worried. She and Vetch are soon trading confidences over weed and pints of caramel oat-milk ice cream.

The heartwarming multigenerational-roommate device also makes an appearance in Louise Erdrich's "The Sentence." Tookie, an ex-con who has found a second life as a bookseller, has her own Vetch; she's dreading a visit from Hetta, a youngish member of her husband's family. With her smudged eyeliner and famously bratty retorts, Hetta is heralded as a "monster," but she arrives tame with new motherhood and radiating empathy. The women end up quarantining together, bonding over Hetta's cute baby and the deliciousness of cookies made with "triple sugar."

But, despite these flirtations with mawkishness, both books admit doubts. In "The Vulnerables," the consoling mood is undermined by the idea that the narrator has writer's block—that she is not actually expressing what she needs to say. At night, when her guard falls, a pent-up negativity is unleashed: the narrator battles "every regrettable moment of my life. Every mistake I'd ever made, every humiliation, every failure, every sin, every harm I'd ever caused another person, deliberately or by accident, every bad or stupid thing I'd ever said or done."

"The Sentence" similarly signals that its cheerful veneer is both fragile and costly to maintain. Tookie may not be tortured by Hetta's presence, but she *is* haunted, stalked by the decade that she lost to prison. For her, quarantine—being alone, trapped in featureless surroundings—stirs up memories of incarceration, and Erdrich uses this analogy to acknowledge the grief that was often voiced during lockdown about stolen time. (The metaphor also places this sorrow in perspective: even a months-long quarantine does not equal ten years of imprisonment.) Tookie's memories of cells and cinder blocks morph into counterfactuals, a reverie of "all that I would never have and would never be": "the silhouette of a mother holding the hand of a toddler, a woman folded along the body of a swayback horse, two people pressed together listening to the low music of wind in a pine grove." Because of her time in prison, Tookie will never be a young mother, a young heroine, or a young lover. She's anguished by this discrepancy between fact and fiction, between her lived and unlived pasts. Beneath their sunniness, Nunez's and Erdrich's novels both express a fear of perseveration, of having too much time to dwell on lost time. They admonish their readers that, if denial is one form of avoidance, allowing your history to prevent you from living what life you have left is another.

In "Blue Ruin," the tension between hiding in fantasy and wallowing in reality erupts into open warfare. More starkly than the other novels, Hari Kunzru's book articulates the dual nature of the pandemic, which was both a disruptive event and a pause that disinterred the past and sent it tumbling into the present. We suffered during COVID, Kunzru suggests, but we shed our illusions.

The novel follows Jay, a delivery driver, who interrupts the graceful idyll of four friends who have absconded from New York City to a cottage upstate. They are denizens of the art world, some of whom Jay knew in a past life in London. One of them, Alice, is his ex-lover, now married to Rob, his ex-best friend. They met when Jay was a painter fleeing his lower-middle-class roots and she was "a goddess, a moonshot," who made Jay feel like "a rude peasant, lost in the enchanted wood."

Jay repressed this chapter of his life for years, becoming what he calls (with a hint of his old East End pompousness) a "fugueur"—an escape artist—and immersing himself in honest, unpretentious labor. The pandemic flings him backward. Apparently suffering from long COVID, Jay faints while unloading Alice's groceries. She installs him in a spare bedroom, where, in his delirium, he relives their courtship and his ascension through the ranks of London's bohemian élite. In the flashback's most striking interlude, Jay and Alice hole up in her aunt's sumptuous apartment to have sex and make art. The fairy tale quickly curdles, falls prey to bed rot. When Jay resurrects the period in his mind, he finds that his memory has rendered "all the rooms as a single shade of gray-green, the color of decay."

The novel—overheated and cartoonish, as befits a fiction that spends a lot of time inhabiting one character's fever dream—combines a Shteyngartian mockery of the idle rich, who refuse to live in reality, with a gothic allegory of entombment and reanimation. As in "Our Country Friends," much of the action takes place within a penumbra of corrupt glamour. The bucolic estate is dotted with surveillance cameras; its owner, who keeps "former spec ops guys on retainer," deputizes Marshal, a friend of Rob's, to patrol the grounds with a military rifle. "Safely hedged," Kunzru writes, "they could dream their timeless dreams." But Jay's presence jolts the vacationers back into history, dismantling their avoidance. COVID likewise disables Jay's nostalgia. It rips down his idealized picture of the past and replaces it with the truth. Trapped with his ex in another claustrophobic space—an oppressively perfect cottage—Jay reëvaluates the visions of

the good life that he's been clinging to for twenty years, and acknowledges that they were cracked from the start.

So, was the pandemic . . . good? Could it have been a necessarily painful catalyst that helped people see the world more clearly? Kunzru is not the only author who appears to suggest as much, and his optimism may reflect the pressure to wrangle those barren years into a coherent narrative, to extract from them as much hope and closure as possible. In "Blue Ruin," COVID unravels the false story that contained Jay's morbid relationship with Alice and forces the vacationers to face how out of touch they've become. A book can prompt similar reckonings, and Kunzru's novel, though it critiques the decadence of the contemporary art world and challenges the art-making impulse, seems to argue for the remedial power of storytelling.

But authors can also harbor skepticism about fiction's power to overwrite past trauma. In "Day," a triptych of a novel that narrates the same day in three consecutive years, Michael Cunningham follows a family into and out of the pandemic, from 2019 to 2021. Dan and Isabel are married but drifting apart; they're both half in love with Isabel's brother, Robbie, who has created an aspirational Instagram account on which he poses as a noble (and hot) pediatrician. The book's comforting structure—"Morning," "Afternoon," and "Evening"—evokes the narrative predictability that so many of us seem to long for. But Cunningham repeatedly undercuts the idea of resolution, at one point hinting that even perfectly concordant households may be "haunted by their own unhauntedness."

In one arresting example of the book's ambivalence, Robbie contracts COVID just as he arrives at a vacation destination, a remote cabin in Iceland. Like Jay, he burns with fever, and his delirium causes time to behave strangely: "The calendar is whispering," he writes to Isabel. He gets swept up by the past, remembering how his sister had helped him conquer a fear of dogs after he was attacked by one. By rewriting his memory of the event, Isabel assuaged the harm, took away its bite. But this comforting story only occurs to Robbie because he is dying, running a fever that injects the past into the present. A scene that appears to celebrate the therapeutic powers of fiction instead crashes against fiction's limits.

When "Day" begins, Isabel, a photo editor, and Dan, a former rock-and-roll singer, have lost the plot of their marriage. Her "inner tumble of thwarted desires" can no longer accommodate his "earnest if unreasonable expectations." As the novel continues, the pair's "element of mismatch, their underlayer of *not quite*" persists and grows; in the last third of the book, "they are no longer married, which, by way of a transition, is all the more final for having escaped their attention, for having occurred in increments, like a leak that goes undetected until the day it becomes apparent that the whole structure has been saturated, so full of moisture and mildew that it can no longer be repaired."

Robbie's death is a rupture; the end of Isabel and Dan's marriage is a delicate unwinding. But, in both cases, Cunningham portrays narratives that fail, that falter, that represent palliative distractions at best. So what's the point of writing? Stories come apart; the stories devised to replace them come apart, too. Maybe any relief must be found in the simple ritual of the telling. In "Day," Dan and Isabel can't succor their relationship or confer retrospective meaning on their unhappiness, but they can, by divorcing, acknowledge and signify change. In the same way, pandemic novels, for all their inability to transform the past or undo millions of deaths, can mark that a real and irreversible metamorphosis has taken place.

The best writing about COVID, then, is flexible, figurative, and hard to pin down. Rather than narrating the pandemic, it drives home the fact that the pandemic happened: that something broke apart, dispersed, and remains to be reconstituted. By resisting closure, books like "Day" refuse to rush readers into an understanding that the world has not yet achieved. They don't fake an equilibrium that is likely months or years away. "I was living precariously in my body," observes the narrator of Deborah Levy's "August Blue," who decides to mark her own sense of destabilization by dyeing her hair blue. "I had not fallen into who I was, or who I was becoming." She only knows that she is not the same. ♦

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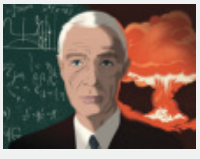
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THE THEATRE

GREAT MIGRATIONS

"Home" and "What Became of Us."

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM

"Home" embodies the grand narrative of Black Americans at mid-century.

To appreciate "Home," Samm-Art Williams's celebrated play from 1979, is, in part, to be drawn back in time, to the heyday of the Negro Ensemble Company, headquartered in New York City. Founded in 1967, it was a crucial hotbed for Black writing, acting, and directing talent, helping to produce names like Phylicia Rashad, Samuel L. Jackson, Esther Rolle, and Denzel Washington. Williams—who died in May, mere days before "Home"'s revival on Broadway, at Roundabout's Todd Haimes Theatre, under Kenny Leon's direction—was a mainstay of the company.

Williams was a big man—six-six and around three hundred pounds, according to his friends—funny and kind. Like Cephus (Tory Kittles), the blithe, antic, tricksterish protagonist of "Home," he was from a small town in North Carolina, called Burgaw. Cephus's is called Cross Roads. Williams got the idea for the play on a Greyhound bus headed to the South from his new home, New York. Like many Black plays of the era, "Home" issues forth from the twin themes of migration and political alienation. Cephus is a down-home guy, a farmer deeply connected to the country soil. He's in love with Pattie Mae (Brittany Inge), the sweetheart of his youth, who goes off to college and gets too full of book learning to feel comfortable returning to Cross Roads. Cephus's long-held hope to marry her is dashed.

Soon, Cephus ducks the Vietnam draft and does time in prison, then reluctantly skips town and heads north, to the coldhearted streets of New York. The speech in "Home" resembles a cycle of lyric poems voiced by high-minded, plain-living folk. Inge and Stori Ayers play a host of characters, sometimes a confirming chorus and sometimes a panoply of tempters and sidekicks, giving Cephus's journey shades of an epic allegory. The dialogue is full of effusions such as this one, from Cephus:

> I love the land, the soft beautiful black sod crushing beneath my feet. A fertile pungent soil. A soil to raise strong children on. I love the rain. That feeds the earth. It's especially nice in May. The warm sparkling drops, cover your face and the ground with its sweet blanket of pure wet. I love the land. I love touching the crops. And gently holding each plant in my hand. And feeling the love and care that Grand-Daddy, Uncle and me put into its cultivation. When you hold a plant, you can feel the heartbeat of God.

The story of a Black man hightailing it away from the South toward new opportunity in the big city is a long-running trope that places Williams's play onto the broad continuum of the Great Migration. A migratory literary cousin of Cephus's might sound a lament like this one, from Langston Hughes's poem "One-Way Ticket":

> I am fed up
> With Jim Crow laws,
> People who are cruel
> And afraid,
> Who lynch and run,
> Who are scared of me
> And me of them.
>
> I pick up my life
> And take it away
> On a one-way ticket—
> Gone up North,
> Gone out West,
> Gone!

But Cephus isn't fed up with the harsh racial codes of the South; in fact, he seems not to notice them much until later in his life, when he realizes that they've eased. And, as it turns out, his ticket isn't permanently "one-way"—the play culminates with a return. Cephus was never cut out for the clime and tough attitude of the North. He wants to feel the soil and see the trees. If the North has any songful impact on him at all, it's

ILLUSTRATION BY KATI SZILÁGYI

that it makes him sound a bit like the narrator of Marvin Gaye's 1971 masterpiece, "What's Going On," particularly in the ecologically minded song "Mercy Mercy Me":

> Mercy, mercy me
> Oh, things ain't what they used to be, no, no
> Where did all the blue skies go?
> Poison is the wind that blows from the north and south and east

Cephus, too, is disillusioned with the world. He's got a pitch-black joke about how God, instead of acting on humanity's behalf, is off having fun in the sun:

> I believed in God! I gave him my life, my soul, my breathing, my sight, my speech. All of me I gave to him. I believed in him totally until he took a vacation to the sun-soaked, cool beaches of Miami, while I needed his help and love in the hot sticky tobacco fields of North Carolina. In a prison in Raleigh, North Carolina. A child.

The poetic diction and oblique delivery of the text in "Home"—much of which feels like it should be addressed to the audience even when it portrays direct encounters—make it a challenge to stage. What the play wants, I think, is a visual language as loose and blurry and funny and flexible as the speech of its characters. Instead, Leon—whose energy and dazzle I tend to commend—creates a very shallow stage plane, all bright, saturated color, more interested in horizontality than in depth, making Cephus and his tribulations look like a series of comic-book panels. Sometimes he's surrounded by the silhouette of a small house, framing his actions with a constant reminder of their domestic and regional importance. Home and hearth have deep meaning here, but they also can be stifling.

There's something intriguing about the idea of rendering dramatic action in static images—like the ancient pictures of the Stations of the Cross. But here the strategy robs Leon of his greatest strength—making physical gesture take on the kinetic qualities of choreographed dance—and casts Williams's play in self-referential amber. The test of a play like "Home," with one foot in the Africanist past (the crossroads is a powerful, bedevilling image in African folkloric and religious traditions) and the other in the grand narrative of Black Americans at mid-century, is how well it can translate into an ever-extending metaphor, applicable to contemporary phenomena and hauntings visited upon us by Cephus's vacationing God. The Great Migration is splendid, awful, almost classical in its implications for those of us with its dust still clinging to our fingernails. And the Black theatre of the sixties and seventies, so explosively relevant to its time and still fighting for its canonical due, should be a shining example of humanistic value for all writers, everywhere, not just fodder for syllabi about a long-lost moment.

There are new stories, every day, of migration and displacement and war's folly, here in the United States but also abroad, hemming us in from all sides. You should be able to feel or hear or see them somewhere in this story, but the frame's too tight.

Like "Home," the new play "What Became of Us"—written by Shayan Lotfi and directed by Jennifer Chang, at Atlantic Theatre Company's Atlantic Stage 2—is about a harrowing journey. Unlike in "Home," nobody in Lotfi's play returns to make a home in the old place again. Two unnamed siblings were played, when I saw it, by Rosalind Chao and BD Wong. (These actors rotate performances with Shohreh Aghdashloo and Tony Shalhoub.) Chao plays the older sister, who, as a child, accompanied their parents on a voyage from the Old Country, which is never named, presumably to keep the play applicable to an infinity of migratory stories. Before long, Wong's character, who's wilder and more individualistic—more prototypically *American*—than his big sister, comes along.

They speak to the audience, recounting their lives in swift summary, but they're really talking to each other; the constant pronoun of the piece is "you." There are some dramatic moments—deaths, births, arguments, discoveries—and the action can seem engineered to make an audience cry. Whoever you are, you can't help but relate. The play has a problem that's opposite, perhaps, from Leon's production of "Home": its open-doors approach to the specifics of place and time makes even its details—the occupations of the siblings, the stories of their lovers—easily swallowed without sticking to the ribs. The performances, as a result, feel vague, the actors swimming through a haze of familiar but cloudy events.

But both productions, despite their flaws, offer truths that recur like seasons of the year, seasons of life. You start out and feel yourself flowering. Trouble comes and makes a home inside your heart. Sometimes you've got to pick up and say goodbye. ♦

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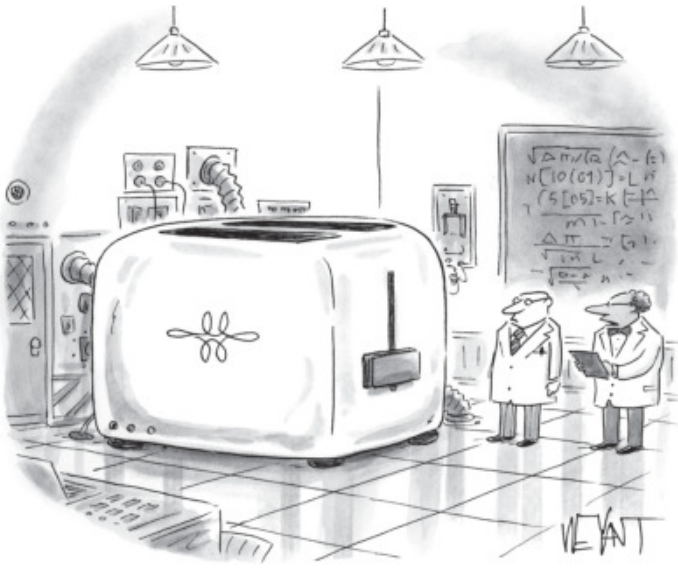
PLEASE RECYCLE THIS MAGAZINE

CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Christopher Weyant, must be received by Sunday, June 16th. The finalists in the June 3rd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the July 1st issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

.....

THE FINALISTS

“I can see several blocks.”
Preston Williams, Manassas, Va.

“I'm worried about that spot on your lower east side.”
Jack Nagler, Toronto, Ont.

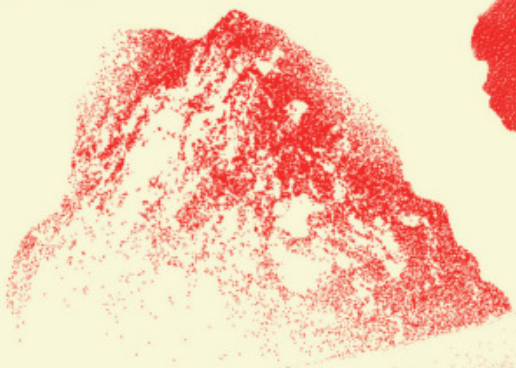
“Looks like atrial gentrification to me . . .”
Ron Hotz, Toronto, Ont.

THE WINNING CAPTION

“My family used to have one, but we lost interest.”
Bob Shiffrar, Boston, Mass.

Pitchfork Music Festival Chicago

JULY 19-21
UNION PARK



FRIDAY, JULY 19

BLACK PUMAS

JAI PAUL · 100 GECS

JEFF ROSENSTOCK • YAEJI • SUDAN ARCHIVES • AMEN DUNES
BILLY WOODS & KENNY SEGAL • TKAY MAIDZA • DOSS • ML BUCH
ROSALI • ANGRY BLACKMEN • BLACK DUCK

SATURDAY, JULY 20

JAMIE XX

CARLY RAE JEPSEN · JESSIE WARE

DE LA SOUL • UNWOUND • BRATMOBILE • WEDNESDAY
WATER FROM YOUR EYES • SWEEPING PROMISES • FEEBLE LITTLE HORSE
HOTLINE TNT • KARA JACKSON • L'RAIN • LIFEGUARD

SUNDAY, JULY 21

ALANIS MORISSETTE

BRITTANY HOWARD · MUNA

GRANDMASTER FLASH • LES SAVY FAV • CRUMB • JESSICA PRATT
MANNEQUIN PUSSY • HAILU MERGIA • MODEL/ACTRIZ
NALA SINEPHRO • MAXO • JOANNA STERNBERG • AKENYA

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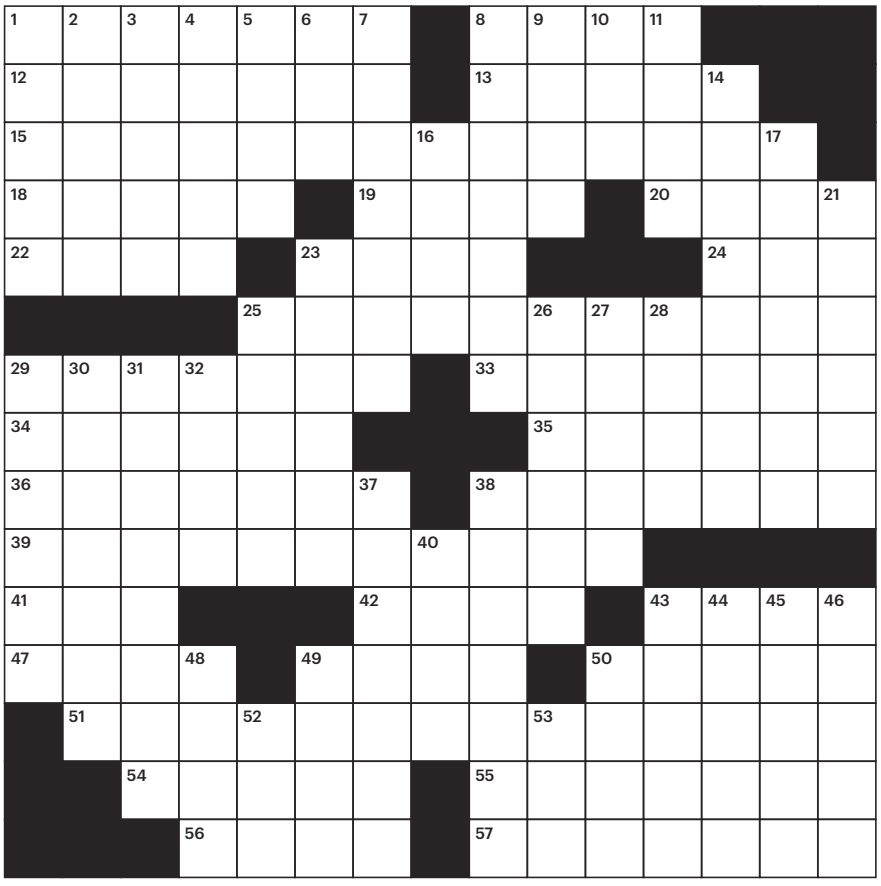
THE CROSSWORD

A challenging puzzle.

BY ANNA SHECHTMAN



ACROSS

1 Line cook's line
8 Humble beginnings, idiomatically
12 Womb-related
13 Dips
15 Informal group that staged a 1970 protest against the exclusion of lesbians from the feminist movement
18 Discharge, as waste
19 Binary
20 Poli-sci subject
22 E-mail folder
23 Settle in at home
24 Architect of the Louvre pyramid
25 New York resort region where Sid Caesar and Jackie Mason got their start
29 Members of a coven
33 Frizz-control product
34 Evenly
35 Like the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit
36 Dashiell Hammett's final novel, with "The"
38 Kept in a manuscript
39 Subjects of some rote learning
41 "Whitney: Can ___ Me" (2017 documentary)
42 Piece of cake?
43 Graffiti artists' signatures
47 "Gone ___"
49 Zoom button
50 "The future ain't what it used to be" quipster
51 Phrase in the names of four chart-topping albums released since 2021
54 Algebra calculation
55 Most corrupt
56 Sources of Manchego or Pecorino
57 Footnote recommendation

DOWN

1 Festive seasons
2 Floor, in French
3 Number of players on an Ultimate team
4 Trough's opposite
5 Help for the puzzled
6 Squelch
7 Tributaries
8 Loser's request, perhaps
9 Winter Olympics jump
10 Tom Collins ingredient
11 ___ beetle
14 Assess
16 Joanna who wrote the 1975 science-fiction novel "The Female Man"
17 "Dubliners" character who plans to escape to Buenos Aires with her lover
21 Dubbed
23 Skim
25 Salves
26 Literature's Mad ___
27 Flags
28 Charles III, for one
29 Monique who wrote "The Straight Mind" and "The Lesbian Body"
30 Hobble
31 Illusory hopes
32 Accessory for Fred Astaire
37 Dispositions
38 What some summer attire lacks
40 Flecks
43 Figure of current importance?
44 Posthumous Sylvia Plath poetry collection that was edited by her estranged husband
45 Unappetizing, say
46 ___ Domingo
48 Four-time Grammy winner Lovett
49 Brood
50 Baked ___ (appetizer sometimes wrapped in pastry)
52 Dejected
53 "Let Me Blow Ya Mind" rapper

Solution to the previous puzzle:

B	E	S	T	■	B	O	O	M	■	A	T	T	I	C
O	N	T	O	■	E	R	R	O	R	P	R	O	N	E
T	R	U	E	■	I	G	E	T	A	R	O	U	N	D
T	A	D	■	C	R	A	S	H	C	O	U	R	S	E
O	V	E	R	R	U	N	■	B	E	N	T	■	■	■
M	I	N	U	E	T	■	P	A	W	■	■	P	A	Y
■	S	T	E	T	■	G	U	L	A	G	■	U	S	E
T	H	I	S	I	S	O	N	L	Y	A	T	E	S	T
L	E	D	■	N	O	O	K	S	■	R	A	R	E	■
C	D	S	■	■	O	D	D	■	L	I	F	T	E	D
■	■	■	F	A	N	G	■	F	A	S	T	O	N	E
M	O	N	S	T	E	R	M	A	S	H	■	R	O	B
E	D	I	T	O	R	I	A	L	S	■	T	I	N	A
N	O	N	O	N	S	E	N	S	E	■	A	C	T	S
D	R	A	P	E	■	F	E	E	S	■	R	O	V	E

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at **newyorker.com/crossword**

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